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*Freethinkers*, a novel, and 'Inventing history: how  
do research, imagination and memory fuse  
creatively in the writing of an historical novel?'

A dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

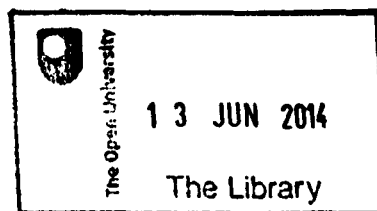
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# **Freethinkers**

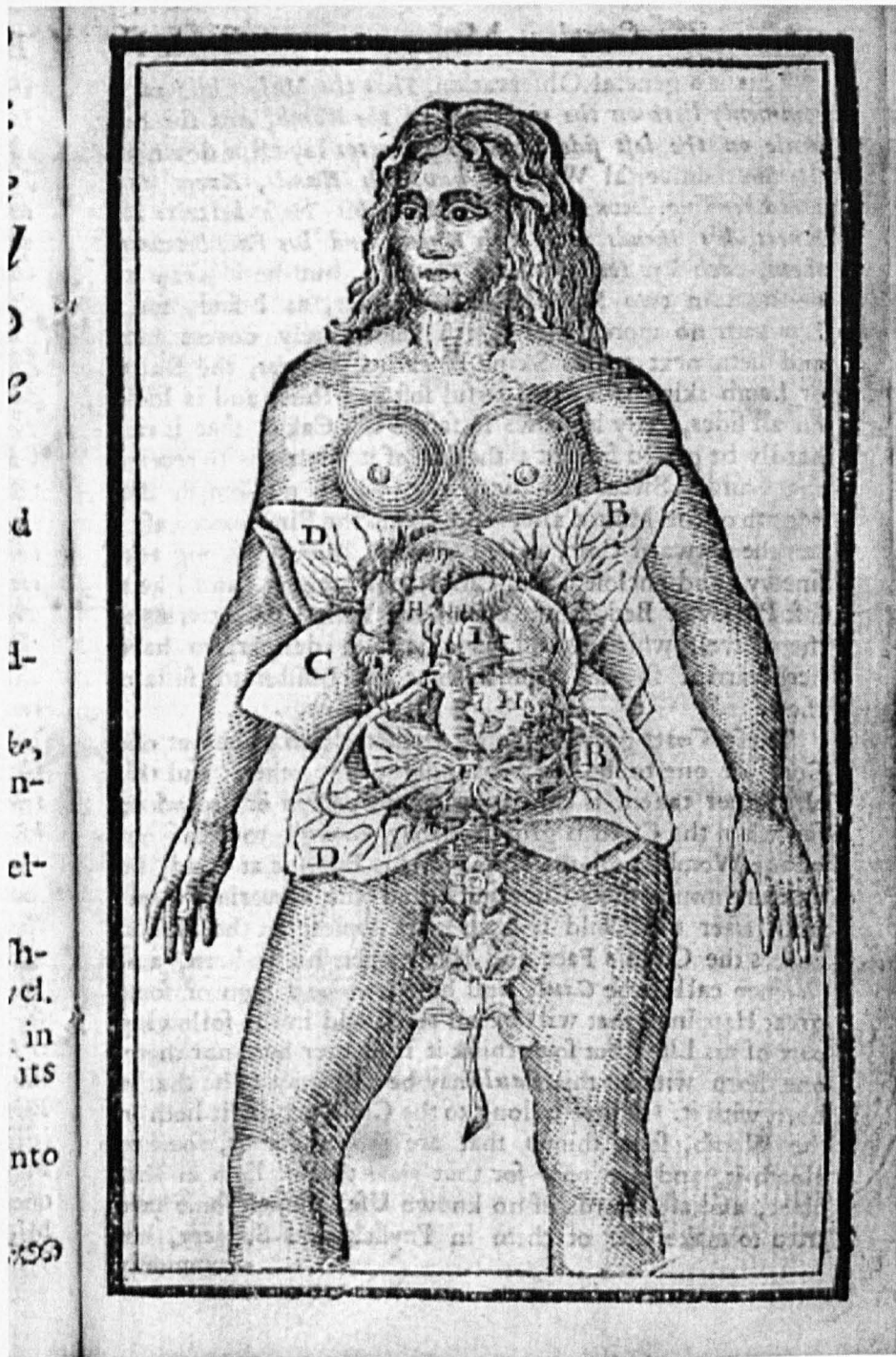
**Heather Richardson**

## **Part I**

# **The Fabric of the Human Body**

*From Scotland we hear, that upon Review of the dead bodies after the fight on the twenty second of June last past, there are found about nine Hundred of the Rebels slain... All persons, men and women, are prohibited to Harbour, Relieve or Correspond with any Rebels, upon pain of being esteemed and punished as favourers of the said Rebellion, and as Persons accessory to and guilty of the same.*

***Domestic Intelligence or News from Both  
City and Country, July 1679***



1682

## **Dr Carruth**

The dead woman is covered with a sheet of thick-woven linen. I reach out and rest my fingertips on the table's edge. No one else is here yet. The porter suggested I stay downstairs by the fire, but I had a hunger to be first to the dissecting room. The air is so chilly that I can see my breath each time I exhale. There's a stove in the far corner, but it has not been lit. I cannot detect any reek of decay from the corpse. She's scarcely a day dead.

Somewhere below a door bangs shut. There's a slow, disordered drumbeat of footsteps on the stairs, accompanied by a deep voice that rarely pauses. I look down at the shrouded figure on the table. This will only be the third dissection I have attended, and my first of a female.

Dr Irvine enters the room like a galleon in full sail, still talking. Behind him comes a wan-faced fellow with a canvas satchel dangling from his shoulder. He is dressed like a down-at-heel Frenchman. Dr Irvine's two assistants follow.

'Here already, Carruth?' Dr Irvine says. 'No sign of Maxwell?'

'I haven't seen him this morning.'

'He was to join me for breakfast.' Dr Irvine shrugs. 'No doubt he has been diverted by someone more enticing.'

Damn Maxwell. How is it that he is invited to breakfast with Dr Irvine, and I am not? And how can he so casually break an appointment, and not be thought any the worse for it?

Dr Irvine takes off his hat and wig and hands them to one of his assistants. The other comes forward to help him out of his coat. Thus divested he tugs his waistcoat and smoothes it over his substantial belly. 'Signor Baldini is joining

us this morning,' he says, gesturing at the foreigner. Italian then, not French.

'He will make sketches when my work is done.'

'Do you intend to publish your sketches, Signor Baldini?' I ask.

He smiles at me, but does not reply, instead scuttling off to a corner of the room where he lifts up a stool that is nearly as tall as he is.

'Save your breath, Carruth,' Dr Irvine says. 'He hasn't a word of English.'

We both watch Signor Baldini struggle to carry the stool closer to the dissecting table.

Dr Irvine's assistants have laid his instruments on a bench. He studies them, reaching out to shift the position of a small saw. At last he turns and places his hand on the linen sheet covering the corpse. My heartbeat quickens. Signor Baldini looks uncomfortable, and murmurs something.

'*Si, facciamo sempre,*' Dr Irvine replies. 'Baldini suggests we say a prayer for the dead woman before we commence.'

'Of course,' I say.

Dr Irvine bows his head. The others do likewise. 'Beloved Father,' he begins, 'within whose gift is life and death. We know that we are dust, and that one day we will cast off our earthly shackles and stand before you for judgement.'

As he prays I notice Signor Baldini unbuckling his satchel. His eyes are still closed and he gives every sign of being intent on his prayers, but he delves in the satchel, sliding a sketchpad out. He was the one who suggested this delay, yet he must be as impatient as I am for the dissection to begin.

Dr Irvine finishes his prayer and looks up, blinking like a man new woken.

'Now, gentlemen. Shall we begin?'



His assistants step forward, one on either side of the table. At a nod from him they each take a corner of the linen sheet and slowly peel it away to reveal the subject of our investigation. A young woman far advanced in pregnancy. Her hair... her face... like Isobel's. The floor lurches beneath my feet and there seems to be no breath in my body. A hand grips my arm and steadies me. I turn to see the anxious face of one of Dr Irvine's assistants. 'Are you taken bad, sir?' he says.

'No, no...' I look again at the dead woman. Not Isobel, of course not. It's just that her hair is the same soft brown, and something in the shape of her brow...

'Nothing to be ashamed of, Carruth,' Dr Irvine says, although the expression on his face does not console me.

'I assure you I am not usually so overwhelmed,' I attempt a laugh. 'Please do not delay on my account. I am quite recovered now.'

We turn back to the corpse. How could I show such weakness in front of Dr Irvine? Worse still, how could this wretched girl put me in mind of Isobel? It was hardly a seemly comparison... *Be still. Concentrate. Study the cadaver.*

I obey my own instructions, and look properly, coolly, at the dead woman. I knew she would be young of course, given her condition, but knowing is a different thing from seeing. She's as yellow as beeswax. Her mouth is held shut by a strip of cloth looped from under her chin to the top of her head. One eye is half-open. Her small breasts lie flat. A day or two ago they must have been plump with milk as her body prepared itself for childbirth. The dome of her belly is strangely flaccid, although it is obvious that the child is still held within it.

Signor Baldini mutters something under his breath. His voice sounds full of pity.

‘Poor lassie,’ Dr Irvine says. ‘The hangman made a widow of her last week.’

‘What was her husband’s crime?’

‘A Covenanter. The usual story. These fellows think they can overthrow the King with no more than a Bible in one hand and a pike in the other.’

‘And there’s no explanation of why she died so suddenly?’ This, after all, is why we are here. ‘There was no sign of fever or pain?’

Dr Irvine fixes me with an odd smile. ‘Her gaolers’ report that she was in as good health as one might expect for a girl that had spent the winter in the Tolbooth prison.’

He walks to the foot of the table, places a hand on each of the girl’s knees and gently pushes her legs apart. ‘There’s certainly no sign that labour had commenced. Look for yourself.’

I do as he suggests, and examine her perineum for a moment. Dr Irvine’s assessment seems correct. I move back up the table and palpate her belly with my fingers, working thoroughly to study every inch of it. I should be able to feel the dead infant’s skull through her skin, or the jut of his shoulder or knee, but I cannot. His position must be odd, or else he is terribly misshapen. ‘There seems to be no fluid in her womb,’ I say. ‘Had her waters broken, or did they leak away *post mortem*?’

‘Again, it is uncertain. Are you familiar with the Tolbooth Prison, Carruth?’

‘Certainly not.’

Dr Irvine seems amused, as if by some private joke. ‘Covenanters are held in the worst of the cells. The floors are thick with filth, and it would take a rare

genius to guess if any flux from her formed part of that cess. Her body is the only evidence we have of what befell her.' Dr Irvine turns and lifts the largest scalpel from the side table. 'And on that note, shall we see what story her womb tells us?'

I nod soberly, trying to disguise the excitement and dread that courses through me like a fever. Signor Baldini clambers up the rungs of the stool and perches on the top like a crow, sketchpad on his lap and pencil in his hand.

Dr Irvine makes a slow, shallow incision from the woman's navel to her pudendum, following exactly the dark line that nature draws on the belly of a gravid female. The flesh parts with an ooze of liquid fat. He makes a similar incision upwards from the navel to just beneath the breastbone. There's no doubting his skill. He makes another long cut, from side to side, passing once again through the navel.

'Our object today is investigation,' he says, 'so my incisions have been cautious. With a cadaver such as this, ill-fed and stretched by her condition, it would be all too easy to cut over-deep, and damage the womb.' He sets the scalpel aside and edges his fingers into the lower incision, feeling his way along its entire length, probing more deeply as he does so. He does the same with the other cuts, and then turns to his two assistants. 'Hold her steady now. One on either side.'

We step away from the table to allow Irvine's men to come closer. When they have laid hands upon the body Irvine peels open her belly, tugging at each flap of skin until all four of them are opened out like the petals of a flower. Her womb is unveiled, the distended heart of the blossom, resting in a bed of congealed blood.

‘Something is amiss here,’ says Dr Irvine. He glances up at me. ‘This is the first time you have seen a female opened, is it not?’

‘I once witnessed a dying woman cut open to save her unborn child.’ I do not mention that the barber-surgeon who performed the procedure was my father.

‘And what do you see here that is different?’

‘The blood. Such a quantity is unusual. And the shape of the uterus. It is...’ I reach into the body cavity and probe the thick walls of the womb. No. Impossible. This cannot be. ‘It appears to be empty.’

‘Let us lift it away. Hold it for me.’

I take my jacket off and cast it to one side, then slide my hands underneath the uterus and lift it up to let Dr Irvine slice it free from the tissue that holds it in place.

‘Och, sir,’ one of the assistants cautions, ‘let me roll your shirtsleeves up for you.’ His offer is too late. The frill of one cuff must have dipped into the blood, and a dark stain is spreading up through the fabric. Nevertheless, I keep still while the man turns my sleeves up, out of the way of further pollution. The uterus is slippery and heavy. A trail of fluid runs from my fingers to my elbow. The urge to wipe it away is almost unbearable.

At last Dr Irvine has finished his snipping and cutting. He lays down his instruments and takes the uterus from me. ‘Take a look inside her, while I inspect the womb,’ he says, laying the organ down on the bench.

I peer into the body cavity, observing the loops of intestine nestling in the pooled blood. There’s a whiff of the slaughterhouse in the air, and I am thankful that it is too cold for the odour to ripen. A protrusion of dark-hued tissue catches my eye and I take hold of it and try to work it free from the tangle of

innards, but it is larger than any bodily part that should be here. 'Dear God,' I say, 'I believe this may be the placenta.'

'But of course!' Dr Irvine exclaims. 'See here – the womb is ruptured, and no sign of child or placenta. *That's* what has killed her.' He leaves the uterus aside and comes to assist me, taking the placenta from me and cradling it as if *it* were the infant. The umbilical cord is still attached to it, and leads back into the body cavity. 'Follow the cord, man!' he barks at one of the assistants. 'See if the child is at the other end.'

The man does as instructed, taking a deep breath and plunging his hands deep into the body cavity. The air is suddenly foul with the stench of human waste, and he turns away, retching. He must have punctured the bowel in his haste. His colleague mutters something ill tempered and brings forward a mop to clean up the vomit. Dr Irvine sighs in exasperation.

'Will you permit me...?' I say. He nods. I insinuate my fingers into the mess of organs, following the umbilical cord as if it were my guide through the maze of the dead woman's body. Gently now. I close my eyes and let my fingertips find their way along the cord until they feel a tiny ribcage. They continue up the foetal torso until they encounter a chin, the delicate nub of a nose and the dome of a skull. 'I have him,' I say, and begin to manoeuvre the infant out. When I have released him Dr Irvine and I move towards the bench, he bearing the placenta and me the tiny corpse. The cord hangs between us, connecting our two burdens. We must look like heathen priests, engaged in some dreadful ritual. My hands are greasy, coated with the first seep of putrefaction. We set child and placenta down side-by-side on the bench.

‘The infant seems sound enough,’ he says. ‘You may examine it, if you wish.’ For a terrible moment I think he means to wipe his hands on his waistcoat. Thank God one of his men steps forward and offers us both towels. Signor Baldini, who I had quite forgotten in these last moments, scribbles away at his sketchpad from his eyrie atop the stool.

I step forward and inspect the baby. The cord is birtled around the infant’s neck, but not so tightly as to suffocate him had he ever been born. I unwind it. The child’s eyes are shut fast. His arms are bent and his fingers loosely clenched, as if he is prepared for a fight. I turn him over, touching his damp skin as gently as I can. His spine is complete, and there is no sign of monstrosity. As I study him his limbs very gradually straighten, released now from the confinement of his mother’s body. I sense Dr Irvine waiting for me to speak. ‘He seems physically sound,’ I say, laying him onto his back once more. My tongue feels dry. There’s a sour taste in my mouth.

‘Indeed.’ Dr Irvine is at my shoulder. ‘It is my deduction that there was some weakness in the womb. See, here -’ He shows me the uterus. It has split apart like a ripe fruit. ‘Have you ever encountered such a thing?’

‘Never. My expertise lies in the more everyday female disorders. Excess or absence of flux, intimate mortifications, suffocation of the uterus...’

Dr Irvine waves a dismissive hand. ‘Yes, yes. Maxwell told me that.’

‘Maxwell?’ The very mention of his name makes me bristle.

‘Aye. It was on his recommendation that I invited you to view this *autopsia*. He tells me you are the man of the moment with the lady patients, and their *intimate mortifications*.’

‘That implies my reputation derives from fashion rather than skill,’ I say stiffly.

Dr Irvine smiles, fixing me with his keen eye. ‘He also said your temperament is as prickly as a whin bush.’

I feel my face grow hot. There is little point in denying the truth of Maxwell’s assessment.

The light is fading, another short winter day drawing to a close. Signor Baldini has requested that lamps be lit and placed around the dead woman so that he may complete his sketches. He is still perched on the stool, scratching away with his pencil. The sound is like a mouse scuttling behind a wainscot. Dr Irvine’s assistants have soaked up the blood and reassembled the woman’s body so that the infant is inside her once more, lying cushioned on the dissected womb with his head resting on the placenta. The lamplight disguises her waxy pallor, giving the illusion of sleep to her face.

I notice that there are deep indentations in her torso, where Irvine’s men gripped her. She has become clay, and will bear the imprint of any who touch her. Once, perhaps eight or so months ago, her husband held her and begot the child that lies in her dead womb. His fingers must have pressed against her warm skin in a spasm of carnal passion. A brief, appalling surge of desire engulfs me. Not for this dead flesh, but for the living woman she once was. God forgive me. I remember the line from the book of Romans: *To be carnally minded is death*. I say it silently, over and over again.

Dr Irvine and I wash and dry our hands. The assistants help us back into our coats. Perhaps he will invite me to sup with him. That will present me with a

dilemma. Isobel's mother and father are expecting me, but surely they would understand that I could not refuse Dr Irvine? He has influence. Connections that are quite beyond me.

'I trust you have found the day instructive, Carruth,' Irvine says, settling his wig back on his head.

'Indeed, yes.'

'Excellent.' He takes up his hat. 'Well, I'll not detain you any longer. I have an invitation to dine with Sir Andrew Balfour and some of the other Fellows. I suppose you're familiar with the Royal College of Physicians?'

'I know of it.' I swallow down my disappointment and jealousy.

'Indeed. We are all abuzz with the soldier's hospital the King is having built in London. Would that he would issue a similar warrant in Edinburgh, eh?'

I mumble something non-committal. It's best not to say anything that might be judged as a criticism of the King.

Dr Irvine gestures back at the dead woman. 'We'll keep her here for another day or so, until she starts to reek. I'll tell the porters to admit you tomorrow, should you wish to continue your inspection of her.'

'You are very kind.' I decide not to tell him that I cannot return to the dissecting table tomorrow. I have a more pressing appointment, in the Tron Kirk, where Isobel will meet me at the altar and become my wife.



## Thomas

It's like I'm flying. Never moved so fast in my life. Out the door. Three big leaps along the landing. Down the stairs. Two at a time. Three at a time. Jumping and flying and never falling. Mother squealing up above. She'll not catch me now.

Into the close and bang-crash into the Keep-Count Man. He doesn't fall but thon book he carries flaps out of his hand and splatters into a puddle.

'Watch where yir going, yi wee skitter!' he gulderns, but I'm away again.

Up the wynds, hop-scotching over the middens, holding my breath through Bad-Smell Close, crossing my fingers past Dead-Bairn Close, and at last I'm up on the Big Road. Check over my shoulder in case Mother is after me. No sign o' her. My heart's going thump-thump-thump. I suck in big deep breaths. When I breathe out it looks like I've got smoke coming out o' my nose. It's that cold. Big men and women push past. They dinnae pay me any mind. They're too busy watching the soldiers march along, all tramp-tramp-jingle-jangle.

Along the Big Road. Cut across the kirkyard, fast as I can, dinnae look left, dinnae look right, dinnae look at the gravestones, fifty-three big steps from one side tae the other. Nearly at Dada's shop. Slow past the Coffee House, so as tae sniff the air. It smells warm and – not sweet... something else. I don't have the word for it, but I like it. There's Dada's sign, swinging above his shop door. A painted green snake curled round a stick. I stop and look up at it. Squeeze my eyes almost shut. Makes it look like the snake is moving. Wiggling and wiggling. It's the best sign in the whole o' Edinburgh. Dada says Mr Fenton across the way wishes he had a sign like ours.

I keek through the window. There's no one there. Dada must be in the back room. I push the door open and march in. 'I'm a rich Laird in need o' physic!' I shout.

'Is that so?' Dada calls, and comes in from the back, all grand with his best wig on. He stops all of a sudden and stares at me. 'Do you know, sir,' he says, 'you're the very spit o' my son Thomas.'

I'd like to keep playacting, but Dada smiles and grabs me up in his arms. 'What brings you here, wee man? Have you been doing battle with your mother again?'

I hide my face against his jacket. It smells like the medicine he makes. 'I let a man in the door, and Mother was cross and Katharine said to run.'

Dada sounds sad. 'Who was it? The butcher? The chandler? How much was he after?'

I dinnae know who it was or how much he was after. I decide to cry.

'There now, wee man,' Dada says, and sets me down on the counter. 'She shouldn't take the strunce with you like that. You're not to know.' He pulls his handkerchief from his pocket and dabs my face. 'I tell you what,' he says, all smiling and twinkly now, 'I've a grand idea for a new cure. It'll mend our fortunes, and that's a promise. What say you help me make the first batch?'

I'm grinding up salt o' hartshorn in the mortar. It smells odd. Makes me cough. Feels like it's burning the insides o' my mouth. There's been customers in and out all afternoon. Some o' them pat me on the head and smile at me. It's quiet now. Dada counts the money. 'What did I tell you?' he says. 'You shall have a penny all to yourself today, Thomas. Don't tell your mother.'

A man comes into the shop. He's all happed up with a muffler birled around his neck so I cannae see his mouth, and his hat pulled low so I cannae see his eyes. I dinnae think he'll pat me on the head. I dinnae think I want him to. Dada steps forward.

'What can I do for you?' he says.

The man looks down at me, then back at Dada. 'I heard tell o' some tablets you make. For the women, you ken?' I have to listen hard to make him out. He looks at me again. 'It's maybe not fit for a bairn's lugs.'

Dada puts his hand on my head. 'Take that hartshorn through to the back now, Thomas, and then give your hands a good wash.'

I do as he says. When I'm done I climb up on a stool and keek through the wee window between the back room and the shop. Dada has it so as he can look and see if a customer comes in when he's at his work. The man is still there, and Dada is parcelling up a fancy pillbox. Dada hands it over tae him, and he gives Dada some coins. I wonder what medicine the man has bought. He looks like a bad man. Maybe it's poison, and he means tae kill somebody. Dada could get into trouble. The man puts the parcel in his coat pocket and leaves.

Quick as a flash I run out from the back room. 'I'm away home, Dada,' I shout.

'What about your penny?' he shouts, but I pay him no mind. I'm off into the street looking for the bad man. I see him over on the other side. He's walking fast, big long steps like a horse, head ducked down. I trot after him. Not too close.

I follow him down streets and up wynds. My legs are getting tired. The shop signs are all strange tae me. A picture o' a black bull with a ring in his nose.

Another of a golden-haired angel. Along another street and down another wynd and at last we're at journey's end in a court I didnae even know was there. I watch him go in through a house door. He hasnae seen me, I'm sure o' that. There's a movement up above at a window, but when I look up no one's there. I take a keek around the court. It's bigger and cleaner than where we stay, but not much. I want tae go back to Dada's shop, and see if he'll still give me my penny. My legs are sore with running after the bad man, and my belly's griping with hunger. I'm not scared, though. I've been lost before, and I always find my way back.

## Dr Carruth

I am being forced up the stairs by a good-hearted mob of kith and kin, most of whom I scarcely recognise. More than half belong to Isobel, and those from my own side only appear at weddings, funerals and other such occasions where they will be well furnished with free food and drink. We stop at the door of the bedchamber.

‘Knock, sir, knock,’ some cousin of Isobel’s slurs in my ear. His breath smells like ancient cheese. Other voices join in, and many hands slap my back in encouragement. I do as I am bid, and rap on the door. After a moment it opens and my supporters cheer. Isobel’s mother peers out, blinking at the brightness of the lamp one of the menfolk is holding.

‘You are impatient, *son*,’ she says, with a lewd smile that makes my skin itch. Her eyes glitter like a bird’s in the lamplight. ‘But fear not. Your bride is ready for you.’

‘Ready and willing, please God,’ someone behind me says, and hoarse, masculine laughter ripples through the air.

My mother-in-law opens the door wider and comes out, followed by two of the servant women. I am pushed into the room and the door pulled shut behind me. Thank God to get away from them all, the men with their crude advice and the women simpering and snickering as if they know my every weakness. Thank God for some relief from the airless rooms downstairs and the stink of sweat and burning lamp oil.

The bed looms before me, its curtains pulled tightly together. The only light and sound comes from the fire crackling in the grate. Then a rustle from behind

the bed-curtains. 'Is that a mouse?' I say. What sort of daft question is that?

Isobel will think I am drunk.

But she giggles, and says, 'Perhaps.'

I feel a ripple of delight at the sound of her voice. This day has been so long and strange. We have not had one moment alone, and have scarcely said a word to each other apart from the vows we exchanged in the Tron Kirk this morning. All day I have been jostled and cajoled, my back slapped and crude comments whispered in my ear. It is as if layer upon layer of filth and grease has coated me. Only now, in the blessed sanctuary of this room, with Isobel's clear voice tinkling like a silver bell in the darkness, do I start to feel clean again. 'Good Lord,' I say, starting to creep towards the bed. 'A mouse! What shall I do? Set a trap? Or perhaps I'd be better fetching a cat?' Yet again I am babbling. Our courtship has been one of earnest debate and common sense, not the foolish bairn-talk some lovers engage in. But what else is a new husband to say at a time like this?

She laughs again, but there is a nervous edge to it now. Of course. She must be even more anxious than I am. I feel a pang of pity for her. We are both innocents, but I at least understand the theory of what we must achieve tonight. 'Don't be afraid, little mouse,' I say. 'I will do you no harm, for I am in grand good spirits.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

I reach the bed, and put my hand to the curtains, ready to pull them back. My eyes have adjusted to the dim light, and I can see the whiteness of my fingers clearly against the deep red of the bed-curtains. 'Aye, today I married the bonniest lassie in Scotland, and that has made me inclined to show goodwill to

all creatures. Even to a mouse.' More nonsense. I can put it off no longer.

Should I take off my wig, my coat? Will it not be odd for me to appear before her, full-clad in my wedding finery, and her likely in no more than a shift? And yet if I completely disrobe now it might take a good ten minutes before I'm ready. But if I do not do it now I must do it in view of her. My mouth is dry and my palms are damp. No more delays. My undressing will have to wait.

I pull the curtains aside so abruptly she jumps and lets out a squeal. She is lying atop the bedspread as naked as the day she was born, and in exactly the same position as the poor lassie I watched Dr Irvine cut apart yesterday. My head spins, just as it did when I first saw the dead girl and thought for a moment that it was Isobel. I sit down heavily on the edge of the bed, turning my back to her.

I feel her eyes on me and hear the fear in her voice when she speaks. 'What is wrong, Robert? The expression on your face, it was so fierce.' She sits and pulls a sheet around her so that she is no longer utterly exposed, moving closer to where I sit. One hand clasps the sheet at her breast, the other lies on her lap. In the dim light her skin looks dark against the whiteness of the linen. Her eyes are bright with tears. 'Do you not like me, then? Am I ugly? Too thin?'

'You're very lovely,' I say. 'I was... overcome.' How can I tell her that what I see is not my slender young bride, but rather a cage made of bones and skin?

'Mother said it would please you to see me laid out for you.' There's bitterness in her tone, in the way she says the word *Mother*. 'It would not have been my choice, Robert, but I know nothing...'

I long to embrace her, comfort and reassure her as a good husband should, but I am afraid that if I place my hands on her my fingers will sink into her flesh

through the layers of sinew and softness to the mess of bowel and blood. A tide of nausea rises within me. I dash away from the bed to the washstand, and vomit into the basin. Too much port wine today. A second spasm grasps my gut, but nothing more comes out. The bitter stink from the basin clears my mind. It's the smell of the tavern, not the charnel house. Life, not death.

Isobel has got up from the bed, substituting the sheet for a robe to cover her nakedness. She advances across the room towards me. 'There's water in the jug.'

I scoop a handful and swill it around my mouth to clean away the sourness. Isobel comes closer and dips a cloth in the jug. She tries to wipe my face, but I turn away. 'I can do that myself,' I say. She does not reply at once, but hands me the cloth, watching me with grave eyes while I dab away the sweat from my brow.

At last she says, 'I had thought, with your profession, and having studied abroad...'

'I do not understand your meaning.'

'Have you not... experienced -' She gestures towards the bed.

I feel my face colour. 'No,' I say. 'Not all young gentlemen are... debauched.'

She takes a deep breath, and speaks. 'Perhaps you will feel better if you come to bed. You are over-tired. We can sleep.'

The room closes in around me, and now feels as airless as the rest of this confounded house. 'I cannot stay here.' I want to be away, back to my own cool, quiet house on the Pleasance. The place to which I am expected to take Isobel tomorrow.



‘What do you mean?’ There’s fear in her voice, and anger. ‘You cannot leave. The house is full of my kin.’

‘Aye, and that’s half the problem.’

She grabs my arms and forces me to look at her. ‘I will not be disgraced in front of my family. You will not walk out of this room until morning.’ Her face is ashen with fury, but her mouth is trembling. What have I done to my girl?

I try to calm myself by breathing deeply. She’s right, of course. If I leave now my failure will be public knowledge by daybreak. Isobel’s family will swoop down on me like cawbies, to protect her reputation. My scalp is prickled with sweat, so I throw my wig aside and splash more cold water onto my head. That’s better. Control yourself, man. Settle your voice before you speak. ‘You are right, of course,’ I say. ‘I would not wish to expose either of us to disdain. Please accept my apologies.’

She steps back from me, staring at me as if I am someone she does not quite recognise. ‘What shall we do now?’

‘You should sleep. Or lie down, at the least. I will sit in the armchair here.’

‘And what of tomorrow?’

‘I do not know.’

She nods, and climbs onto the bed, pulling the curtains shut. The bed creaks and I hear the rustle of linen. I imagine she is putting on a shift. Dressing herself more modestly than her mother advised. The thought of my mother-in-law makes me shudder. I imagine her instructing Isobel in that sly way she has, telling her whatever it is mothers are supposed to impart to daughters to prepare them for their wedding night. Poor Isobel. Whatever she expected, it was surely not this.

I unbutton my coat and sit in the armchair. There's no sound from the bed now. Downstairs a cork pops and the gathered uncles and cousins cheer raggedly. Pray God they disperse soon enough to their own beds. It is long past midnight. Day will not break until near the hour of eight. I must wait here till then, for whatever the morning will bring.

## Thomas

Mother walks faster than any o' us. She has Anna by one hand and me by the other, and drags us along behind her. Katharine has tae run tae keep up. I look over my shoulder at her. 'Are you running out o' puff, Kat?'

'Sure it helps tae warm me up,' she says, and smiles, but I can see she's no breath in her.

'Stop your gabbing,' Mother says, and hauls that hard on my arm I think she'll pull it off altogether. 'Pick up your feet, Anna. You'll wear your shoes out, slithering like that.' Anna starts tae gurn, and that makes Mother more crabbit than ever.

I'm glad tae see the shop sign up ahead. My friend the green snake. Mother will not be so fierce with us in front o' Dada. She'll tackle him instead.

Bang, crash, she's in through the door, and us three bairns stood on the street outside. I look up at Katharine. 'Should we go in?'

She pauses, listening tae the rise o' Mother's voice inside the shop. 'I suppose so. We came because we were starved with cold, so there's no point in biding out here.' She reaches out a hand each to Anna and I. 'Come on then.' Katharine holds my hand nice and gentle. She disnae squeeze my bones till they crack.

The three o' us shuffle in through the door. Mother goes on with her scolding, word after word after word. Dada looks over at us and gives me a wee smile. That puts Mother in an even worse twist. 'Aye, you smirk away there, you grinning fool. That won't warm your bairns, and us without a lump of coal in the house.' She pushes past him intae the back room. 'Oh aye!' she screeches, 'you're keeping yourself all snug in here, with your stove burning!'

It's not fair. Dada needs the stove lit for making his medicines. I tug Katharine's sleeve.

'What is it, wee Tam?' she whispers.

The thoughts I want to speak are jumbled in my head. My eyes feel all stingy. Katharine hunkers down beside me. 'Don't cry, Tam. She'll only be crosser.'

The door o' the shop bangs open and a grand looking man comes in. He's wearing a coat with more shiny buttons than I can count, and he has a sealed letter in his hand. Mother's still guldering at Dada in the back room. The grand man looks down at us bairns. He stares hard at me. 'I suppose you must be Thomas?' he says.

I nod.

There's a pause in Mother's shouting. Dada keeks out through the hatch. 'Oh!' he says, and smiles. 'Sir Patrick!' He bustles out intae the shop, with Mother close behind.

The grand man looks very sad, or maybe very cross. I can't tell which. 'I don't suppose you have what you owe me?' he says.

Dada keeps smiling, the way he does when Mother shouts at him. 'I have a wee bit, Sir Patrick...' He opens the money drawer under the counter. 'I could let you have two pounds.'

Mother turns on him. 'You've been holding two pounds by, and us with nothing but porridge to eat this last fortnight!'

Sir Patrick shakes his head. 'It's no good, James. That's three quarters now you haven't paid a penny. I cannot let it continue, not when there's men of business aplenty would gladly take the shop on.'

'Take the two pounds now,' Dada says, 'and I'll have more for you next week. Business is improved this last wee while.'

'It's too late for that,' Sir Patrick says. 'I need a reliable tenant.' He hands Dada the sealed envelope.

'And what's that?' Mother says.

Sir Patrick sighs. 'It's an eviction notice.'

'An eviction notice? Well, you've a brave cheek!' Mother marches over tae Sir Patrick, and starts poking him in the chest. 'We're family! What sort of man treats his family like this?'

'We're only distant cousins,' Dada says, trying tae smile. 'We can't blame Sir Patrick for wanting his rent.'

Mother whirls round and gives Dada a box on the ear. 'Would you listen to yourself! You'll stand up for anyone but your own wife and bairns.' She turns back tae Sir Patrick. 'And as for you,' she says, poking him again, 'you ought to be ashamed of yourself. That bairn there is your godson.' Before Sir Patrick can speak she stops poking and starts slapping his chest. She's getting fiercer and fiercer, and her face is all red. The buttons on Sir Patrick's coat jangle every time she slaps him. He starts stepping backwards, reversing himself out o' the shop.

'Aye, out you go, you dog!' Mother shouts.

His face is nearly as red as Mother's now. 'I'll be coming back,' he says, 'and I'll bring the bailiffs with me. We'll see if you're so free with your fists then, for they'll land a punch on anyone who tries to thwart them, man or woman.'

He goes. Mother swaggers around the shop, hands on her hips. 'I showed him, eh?' she says, not looking at any of us. 'He'll not mistake me for a soft touch.'

Dada opens the money drawer and piles the coins on the counter top. 'You may take these,' he says. 'Split it between the grocer and the butcher. They'll maybe give us more credit then.'

Mother stops swaggering. 'What about the coalman? And the landlord?'

Dada sags down, like he's ready for his bed. 'Dole it out whatever way you think best.'

She goes over tae the counter, pokes at the coins, and clamps her lips together the way she does when the notion o' shouting has gone off her. My belly rumbles. I want something tae eat, but I dinnae think this is the time tae say so.

## Dr Carruth

Isobel and I sit down to our meal of chops and stewed turnip. There is no conversation between us. No sound but the scrape of cutlery on our plates. The chops – sent in from the nearest cookhouse - are tough as boot-leather. I ordered them well done, for of late I can barely endure the flavour and texture of meat. Any hint of the flesh it once was makes the gorge rise in my throat. Isobel hacks at hers with her knife, staring down at the chop with a look of intense concentration. Her skin is winter-white, apart from the shadows of sleeplessness under her eyes.

Within a week of Isobel's arrival here as my wife, my housekeeper quit her position. I am still puzzled by it. The old woman seemed a steady sort, and had attended well to the domestic requirements of a bachelor such as myself. Her abrupt removal has cast Isobel's spirit's down greatly. She tortures herself to think what she might have said or done to offend. My reassurances do nothing to console her, and have in no way thawed the frost between us. The upshot is that we are without a servant, reliant on a daily visit from my mother-in-law's maid-of-all-work to save us from squalor, and the local cookhouse to supply our eatables.

There's a rattle at the front door. I manage to cut a piece from my chop and put it in my mouth. It is stringy, tasteless. Isobel sets down her knife.

'I quite forgot,' she says, 'we have no one to answer the door. Shall I go?'

I nod in agreement, still chewing my mutton, and listen to the conversation drifting through from the hallway. A man's voice. Isobel returns, half-closing the dining room door behind her. 'It's a Mr Fenton to see you.'

Fenton. It takes a moment for me to remember him. Apothecary and man-midwife. Respectable enough, but of no significance. 'Does he not know it's dinner time?'

Isobel fixes me with a cool look. 'Shall I send him away?' Her voice has a crisp tone I've not heard before.

I fling down my knife. 'No, no. I'll go down to him.'

Fenton is waiting in the hallway. He's a man of middle years, his face wizened as a walnut but with a bright intelligence in his eye as he watches me close the dining room door behind me. I decide against showing him into my consulting room.

'I'm sorry tae disturb you and your wife, Dr Carruth,' he says, making no effort to soften his common way of speaking. 'I wudnae interrupt you if it wisnae gie serious.'

'Well then, you may tell me, if it won't keep.'

'I was called tae attend a lassie called Jonet Stewart.'

'I don't believe I know her.'

Fenton smiles. 'No, I'm sure you dinnae, for she's only a servant-lass. In the house of William Dundas, the advocate.' He skewers me with a look. 'You've maybe heard o' *him*?'

I feel my face colour. 'Of course.'

Fenton nods, with a look of satisfaction that infuriates me. His face becomes more serious. 'Poor Jonet's in a wild state. There's a fierce heat from her, and...' he glances down at the floor. 'It's a wee bit delicate, Dr Carruth.'

'Some female affliction, I take it?'



Fenton coughs, and shifts from foot to foot. 'Her mistress tells me her private regions are all swelled up and blistered as if she'd been scalded. She has the bloody flux, and a leak of blood too, but I cannae be sure if it's her natural flow or some aspect of the malady.'

'Her age?'

'She hasnae reached sixteen yet.'

I consider the possibilities. It could be some ferocious manifestation of the pox, or the ill effect of a draft of pennyroyal tea taken to rid her of a misbegotten child. 'What sort of young woman is she?'

'Decent, according to her mistress. There couldnae be suspicions of any carry-on with the same wee girl.' Fenton shuffles closer to me. 'She's been poorly this twenty days past, and shows no sign o' mending.'

'Twenty days! And has no other physician attended her?'

Fenton squirms, as if his clothes have suddenly become uncomfortable. 'They did call on Dr Irvine last week, but his cures made nae difference. It was him suggested we come tae yourself.' Fenton looks at me, a cautious cast to his eye, waiting to see how I will react to this information.

'Twenty days is too long for a pox fever. Too long for almost any fever to persist.' I keep my voice steady, nonchalant. 'If the lassie's life is in peril I'd best take a look at her. Wait here while I gather my instruments and then we can be on our way.' I go quickly to my consulting room at the back of the house and lift my bag. When I return I find Isobel in the hallway, engaging Fenton in conversation.

'I have offered your good lady my apologies for stealing you away,' Fenton says.

'I am sure my husband will be able to help this poor lassie,' Isobel says, favouring me with a smile. I feel my spirits lift, and remember why I fell in love with her. Tonight, perhaps, I will try again...

I would happily keep silence on our walk to the Dundas house, but Fenton seems determined to talk.

'Your wife is a fine-favoured lassie,' he says. 'I hear you're only lately wed.'

'You hear right,' I say, staring straight ahead to avoid his inquisitive eyes.

'And have you no servants about the place?'

Damn him! He misses nothing. 'We are without a maidservant at present.'

'That must be a bother to you, and your lady.'

I make no reply. We reach the crossroads and turn towards Cowgate where the town becomes busier. There are more gentlemen on foot and horseback here. I scan each one as he approaches, regretting my decision to walk with Fenton. I have some apothecaries among my acquaintance—decent men who attend the Tron Kirk, and are members of my Lodge—but Fenton is a sleekit dust-rat of a man. The sort who is best suited to selling powders for the cure of Grocer's Itch and Scrivener's Palsy.

The Dundas house looks well enough. It's not the best residence in Perret's Court, but not the meanest either. In this part of the town you might find Lairds and lie-about's housed side-by-side. Fenton knocks on the door. A manservant admits us, and we walk upstairs to the very top of the house, to the sick-chamber.

The tiny room is in near-darkness, with the shutters closed across the window and one lamp burning by the bedside. There's a sharp smell, more like

the rank scent of a wild animal than the more familiar sour sweat of a sick person. It takes my eyes a moment or two to adjust to the dim light, and make a first appraisal of my new patient. Jonet Stewart is a stout girl with a full, womanly shape to her in spite of her tender years. She twists beneath the coverlet in the narrow bed, as if she is trying to find comfort in a field of thistles. A woman I take to be the mistress of the house is sitting by her bedside on a stool. The room is so cramped that Fenton and I must stand in the small space between the door and the end of the bed.

Fenton introduces me. 'Dr Carruth, Agnes Dundas, wife of William Dundas.'

'I hear it was you cured the Laird of Desmond's wife of her trouble,' she says, standing up as she speaks. There's a trace of rural Galloway in her accent, still making itself heard through her Edinburgh affectations.

I bow politely at her. 'Fenton tells me the girl has been ill this twenty days past.'

'Aye.' She glances over at Fenton, and then down at the girl. There's something brittle in the way her head moves, as if her nerves are jangled. 'At first it was no more than a – ' She hesitates, pulls a lace-edged handkerchief from her apron pocket and dabs it at her face.

'Please be frank with me, madam. I am a medical man and you will not embarrass me.'

Mistress Dundas holds the handkerchief in front of her eyes and speaks. 'The poor lassie has a wild pain each time she makes water, and a twisting in her guts. I boiled her up some barley water to drink, but her condition hasn't mended. She's worse now than she was at sunrise.'

‘Have you any notion what might have caused it?’

‘None at all, Doctor.’

‘Think back, now. Three weeks ago. Did she, perhaps, eat something that might have been spoiled?’

Mistress Dundas stiffens. ‘Indeed not. I keep a good larder.’

‘Well, may I come closer?’ She stands there by the bed like a guard dog, and for a moment I think she will not give way, but at length she moves towards the door, allowing me into the gap between the wall and the bed.

I walk to the bedside and sit down. The stool is unsteady on its rickety legs.

‘Jonet, I am Dr Carruth, and I am come to help you.’

Jonet rolls her head from side to side and mumbles something I cannot understand. At least she is responding to the sound of my voice. I lay my hand on her forehead. ‘A dry fever,’ I say.

‘I mixed a tincture to break it,’ Fenton says, ‘but it hasnae worked as yet.’

I turn to Mistress Dundas. ‘I will need to examine her, madam. Do you consent to it?’

‘If you must.’

I stand again and unfasten the shutter.

‘Oh no, Doctor,’ Mistress Dundas cries out. ‘It wouldnae be respectable.’

I suppress my irritation at the woman’s primness. ‘I can be faster about my work with the light of day shining through the window. Mr Fenton will quit the room while I conduct the examination, and you may stay with me.’ I speak in my sternest tone, and Mistress Dundas ceases her arguing.

With the shutters open and Fenton banished to the landing outside the bedroom I gently lift the coverlet off Jonet. Heat rises off her like the blast from

a forge. Her nightdress is tangled in her legs, and stained with the leavings of the bloody flux. I pull the nightdress up to expose her lower body. Mistress Dundas whimpers quietly as I look more closely at Jonet's private regions. They are as distended as any I've seen on newly delivered women, and further bloated by water blisters as large as cooked barley-grains. The blisters are at their worst around the girl's urethra, which suggests that the affliction is related to the urine rather than any amatory misdeeds. 'You say she is greatly pained when she makes water?'

'Aye, Doctor.'

I lay my hand against the girl's belly. It is tight and swollen. Her bladder must be filled to bursting. I feel her flinch, although my hands are soft and I hope my touch is gentle. 'When did she last make water?'

'Not for a good few hours now. It was such agony for her, I think she must be afeard to go at all.'

'Is it still in the chamber pot?'

'Certainly not, Doctor. I keep a clean house.'

'Do you recall what colour her water was?'

'A sort of pinky-brown, sir. Not natural.' She peers over my shoulder at Jonet, then moves quickly back. 'I'd have kept it if I'd known it was important.'

I make the girl respectable again. This is a puzzle. I have never seen a female pudendum with quite such an affliction. Undoubtedly she is in agony from the swelling and blisters. It is almost certainly the urine that is the cause of it. What agent could have made her natural water so poisonous? Sour-in, sour-out, the old wives say. It *must* be something she has eaten.

‘Mistress Dundas, are you quite sure that Jonet hasn’t eaten or drunk anything these last weeks that might have upset her constitution?’

Jonet turned again on the bed, and tried to speak. Mistress Dundas motions for me to stand, and I exchange places with her. She sits, and leans in close to Jonet. ‘What’s that, lassie? What do you say?’

Jonet speaks again, but her voice is so low and hoarse that I can’t make her out. Mistress Dundas looks up at me. ‘I think she said something about sweeties.’

‘Sweeties?’

Jonet speaks again, louder this time, but her words are still incomprehensible to me.

‘Aye, I think so,’ Mistress Dundas says.

‘Would you know what sweeties they might be?’

‘She’s had no sweeties I know of since Handsel Day.’

I glance around the room. Apart from the bed and stool there is no other furniture. A small jug and basin sit on the floor in the corner behind the door.

‘Is this Jonet’s bedchamber?’

Mistress Dundas looks flustered. ‘Aye, and it does her well enough. What more would she need?’

‘Where does she keep her belongings? She must have a change of linen? A gown for churchgoing?’

‘There’s a chest below the bed there.’ She gives me a sharp-eyed look. ‘Do you want to hoke through it, Dr Carruth?’

I dislike her turn of phrase. It makes me sound like a sneak. However, that is indeed what I want. 'It may be that we'll find some solution there to what has made her so ill.'

'You think if you ken that then you'll ken better how to mend her?'

'That's it exactly, Mistress Dundas.' She's shrewd. I'll give her that. I kneel down and reach under the bed.

'Mind the chamber pot,' Mistress Dundas says tartly.

It's awkward trying to pull the chest out, with so little space in the room. I grow hot and flustered in the attempt, conscious of Mistress Dundas's eyes on me. 'Perhaps Fenton and I could carry this out onto the landing,' I suggest. 'It may disturb Jonet less if I inspect it there.' Mistress Dundas opens the door and ushers Fenton in to help me with my task.

Together we lift the chest and carry it out onto the landing. The light is poor, so Mistress Dundas shouts down the stairs for someone to bring a lamp. For a few moments the three of us stand there, an uneasy silence settling on us. A girl comes up the stairs carrying a lighted lamp.

'Hold it up high, Mary,' Mistress Dundas says. I take Mary to be her daughter. They share the same nervous movements.

I open the lid of the chest. Its contents are disordered. 'Och, Jonet, you clarty girl,' Mistress Dundas says, as if the servant-girl were present to hear her chastisement.

I begin to remove Jonet's belongings. First a dress – the fabric is well worn, but respectable enough for churchgoing. I hand it to Fenton. There's a tangle of petticoats, chemises and stockings. I turn to Mistress Dundas. 'Would you be good enough to take out these garments?' Mary gives a little snigger, which

ceases abruptly at a glance from her mother. Mistress Dundas gathers up the underclothes, and hugs them firmly to her bosom.

With the chest empty of clothes we peer into it. There is a bundle of papers tied up with a length of twine, and a plain lacquer box. The sight of the box makes me stop short. It is the very mate of the one Isobel brought with her when she came home with me the day after our wedding day. For a moment I think I will lose my composure at the bitterness of the memory.

Mistress Dundas throws down her bundle and snatches out the papers. She unlooses the twine and inspects them. I steady myself and glance over at the papers. They seemed to be nothing but song-sheets and penny handbills. Mistress Dundas mutters vague, disapproving comments as she leafs through them. I take a deep breath, reach into the chest and lift out the lacquer box. It is a little more than half a foot in length. The contents rattle, but it feels so light that it could be empty. Isobel's contains an ivory comb and a collection of the strange items women require to dress their hair.

'Where did Jonet come by this box?' he said.

'I couldn't tell you.' Mistress Dundas gathered the papers back together again. 'I can't understand why she has taken to this sort of vanity.'

I open the box. Inside are several hairpins, along with a small pasteboard carton. The carton bears some similarities to the ones the apothecaries use to pack their pills and powders, but it is an unusual shape: a hexagon, rather than the more usual square or circle. I turn it upside down, but there is no mark or signature on its underside. When I open the carton I find a residue of what looks like sugar. I lick my finger, dab it into the pale dust and taste it. Yes, sugar right enough, but with some unusual aftertaste.



‘Do you know what this carton contained, Mistress Dundas, or where Jonet might have come by it?’

‘Indeed I do not.’ She looks from the carton to the unsuitable song-sheets and back again, as if she cannot quite believe that Jonet had kept secrets from her.

I glance up at the daughter. ‘What about you, Miss Dundas?’

‘Me?’ The girl looks startled to have been addressed.

‘Aye. Did Jonet make any mention to you of anything out of the ordinary?’

‘No,’ she snaps.

‘Perhaps I may take a wee keek at it?’ says Fenton. He puts Jonet’s Sunday dress back in the chest and extends his hand towards me. Much as it irks me to do it, I can see the wisdom of letting him inspect the carton.

‘The boxes you pack your pills and powders in – where do you get them?’ I say. ‘It strikes me that if I could find the apothecary who prepared whatever was in this carton, I might be closer to knowing what ails Jonet.’

‘There’s only the one supplier in the Burgh,’ he says. ‘Some apothecaries may order their cartons in from further afield, but the most of us go to McAllister the boxmaker, at the bottom of Hackerston’s Wynd.’

I stand up and let Mistress Dundas put Jonet’s other belongings back in the chest. ‘Very well. I will prepare a soothing poultice for young Jonet which I will have carried to you here. Then I’ll seek out this McAllister and see what he has to tell me.’

Fenton hands the carton back to me, then tilts his head and clasps his hands together like a beggar on the prowl for spare change. ‘I have a fine supply of

medicaments in my own place of business, Dr Carruth, if I can be of service to you.'

'I have a receipt of my own devising for the poultice, I thank you.'

'Ah, yes, I understand.' Fenton knows – like all in his trade – the importance of preserving the secrecy of our special formulations. 'Then perhaps I can approach Mr McAllister on your behalf, to save you the bother, you being so busy.'

I pause before speaking, fearing that my irritation with Fenton will be too obvious in my voice. 'Forgive me, Fenton, but I would rather resolve these matters myself.'

Mistress Dundas leads us down the stairs, with Mary to the rear, lighting our way. As we reach the second landing a door opens and I catch a glimpse of a girl's face and a gleam of red hair. Mary sets the lamp down on a table and slips into the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

'How many daughters do you have, Mistress Dundas?'

'Just the one,' she says. 'The other lassie is Elizabeth Edmonstone, the Laird of Duntreath's daughter. She stays with us, things being as they are just now in Stirlingshire.'

'Aye, the countryside is a dangerous place these days.'

'Murder and outrage in every corner. My husband complains of the additional expense of her biding here, for we'll get no benefit from it.'

'Still, it must be pleasant for your daughter to have a companion.'

Mistress Dundas does not reply.

## Thomas

I clap my hands o'er my lugs and stare as hard as I can at the book before me.

*Amo, amas, amat*, I say tae myself. *Amamus, amatis, amant*. It's no good.

Mother's voice finds its way past my fingers, past my Latin, and goes right inside my lugs and intae my head. She's not screeching, but she's giving Dada a right chewing. I look across the table at Katharine. Her face is all screwed up as she studies her book. She moves her lips as she reads, and disnae seem tae hear Mother at all. Anna shifts beside me on the bench. She stares out the window intae the close.

There's a rap at the door and Mother stops her blether. 'Who's that now? Eh? Someone else looking for money?' She stomps over tae the door and opens it a crack. I keek round, but I cannae see who it is. She slams the door and birls round tae Dada. 'It's a Doctor Someone-or-other to see you. Do you owe money to them now too?'

Dada straightens up. 'He might be here to buy something.'

Mother does the laugh that means she's not really laughing, but she disnae stop Dada going tae the door. He opens it wide, and now I can see the man standing there, although it's so dark on the landing I cannae make much o' him out, except that he's tall and disnae look poor. Dada talks tae him a minute, and then brings him in.

'Now children, wife,' says Dada, 'this is Dr Carruth. He is a very important medical man.' Dr Carruth stands all stiff and still, but his eyes flutter around, looking at everything – the room, the furniture, Mother's gown, me. I've never seen any man with a face like his. You wouldnae ken what he was thinking.

Dada coughs, the way he does when he's serving the gentry. 'I have established a small pharmacopeia in the box room here,' he says, leading Dr Carruth across the floor and into the wee room. *Pharmacopeia*. I like that word. I practise saying it in my head. Then I slither off the bench and follow them, juking in past Dr Carruth.

I clasp Dada's hand. 'May I watch, Dada?' I look up at him, watching his face.

'Of course you may, Thomas,' he says. 'Remember, you must call me "Father", not "Dada". You are not a baby any more.'

'Yes, Father,' I say, and wait for his smile, but he's looking at Dr Carruth.

'Do you have children yourself, Doctor?'

'No,' Dr Carruth says, with a snap in his voice. 'I am not long married.'

'Time enough, then,' Dada says. He picks up a wee jar of ointment from a shelf and polishes it with his sleeve then sets it back. 'Our space here is a bit confined, as you see, but the lease on my last shop was not satisfactory, so...' He looks up at Dr Carruth, and his eyes are going blink, blink, blink. 'I beg your pardon,' he says. 'You wanted to talk to me about...?'

'I have a patient, a girl called Jonet Stewart. Do you know of her?' Dada shakes his head and Dr Carruth takes a carton out of his pocket. It's an odd shape, like the cartons Dada uses for special medicines.

Dada looks at it and his face goes all pale, and then all pink. 'Oh,' he says. 'That's one of mine, is it?'

'There's no mark on it to indicate so, but McAllister the boxmaker tells me you recently bought a number of them from him.'

'Aye, well...' Dada shrugs.

‘Do you use this shape of box for some particular treatment, Mr Aikenhead?’

Dada laughs. ‘Well, yes.’ He looks down at me. ‘You run back out to your sisters, Thomas.’

‘Och, Dada... Father... I want tae stay here and learn the medicines.’

Dada sighs. ‘Promise me you won’t carry tales to your mother.’

‘I promise.’

‘He’s bright as a button,’ Dada says tae Dr Carruth, ‘and I don’t want to be handing the wife any more weapons to beat me with.’

‘The carton, Mr Aikenhead. What did it contain?’ Dr Carruth’s voice is like a clergyman’s, all sober and serious.

Dada laughs again, and that seems to make Dr Carruth crosser still, so Dada stops laughing and says, ‘Well, it is a little combination of my own devising called a *pastille espagnole*.’

‘A pastille? Like a... sweetie?’

‘Aye, they’re not unlike sweeties, but not as... sweet.’

‘Mr Aikenhead, my young patient lies dangerously ill. She is in the grip of a dry fever, and her private regions are afflicted with the most ferocious blistering I have ever encountered. Is there a chance that these pastilles of yours might have been the cause of her condition?’

‘Oh, dear, dear, dear...’ Dada’s all of a fluster. He turns to the shelves of jars and bottles and hokes through, clinking them all together sae hard he’ll crack them. Then he lifts out a wee shiny jar with a big, wide cork for a stopper. He opens it and holds it out tae Dr Carruth.

The doctor leans over tae inspect the contents, but jumps back straight away. 'Dear God,' he says, and pulls a handkerchief from his pocket tae cover his nose and mouth. 'The stench of it is foul.'

'Aye, it's sharp, right enough,' says Dada, 'but it's beautiful to look at, don't you think? See how it gleams.' He tilts the jar, and I stand on tippy-toes so as tae see inside it. It's full o' dull brown powder, but when Dada rocks the jar from side to side the powder shifts and changes colour. One moment it's green, the next gold, the next brown again. A magic powder.

'What in the name of heaven is it?' says Dr Carruth.

'You're not familiar with it, Doctor?' Dada smiles. I smile too, because Dada knows something that Dr Carruth disnae. 'Crushed blister beetle,' Dada says. 'Known to some as the Spanish fly.'

Dr Carruth goes all pink in the face. 'You make and sell such... aids to concupiscence?' he says. *Concupiscence*. That's a new word for me. I've not heard it before.

'There's many a respectable married couple have need of it, and there's no sin in matrimonial delight, is there, Doctor?'

'And what need has an innocent young girl, scarcely sixteen years of age, of such an item?' Dr Carruth is shouting now, in his angry preacher's voice.

Dada shrinks down, like he does when Mother is in a rage. 'I wouldn't know that, sir.'

'For God's sake, put the filthy stuff away. What were you thinking of, selling such a thing to a child?'

'I am certain, sir... well, as certain as I can be... that I did not sell my *pastilles espagnoles* to any young girl. I cannot rightly recall who...' He puts

the jar back on the shelf, then opens the cupboard where he keeps the ledgers. 'I keep records, you see. There'll be a note of my customers in here somewhere.' I remember the bad man who came to Dada's shop to buy tablets, and how I followed him to where he stayed. Maybe there was someone in the house waiting for him, waiting for the tablets. I saw someone keeking out the window, I'm sure I did. Maybe it was this servant lassie that's sae ill, who Dr Carruth is trying to save.

'Never mind that now,' says Dr Carruth. 'What of an antidote?'

'An antidote? Well, I couldn't be sure. Perhaps, if I had my books about me, but they're packed away at my cousin's house. Lack of space here, as you see.'

Dr Carruth shakes his head. 'I have no wish to waste my time here any longer, Mr Aikenhead. You may pray that I can devise some treatment for my unfortunate patient. If I do not, you may find yourself in worse straits yet.' He strides out of the room, and Dada and I follow after him.

'She must have eaten them all down in the one go,' Dada says. 'If she'd taken them one at a time, as advised, she'd have come to no harm.'

Dr Carruth disnae say anything back. He marches straight past the table where Katharine and Anna still sit at their books, and disnae even look at Mother. As soon as the door closes behind him I clap my hands over my lugs. There's bound tae be screeching now.

## Dr Carruth

The reading rooms of the University medical library are bright with the natural daylight flooding in through the tall windows, but it is a different matter among the bookshelves. Each aisle is like a dim cloister, kept dark and dry the better to preserve the books. I avail of one of the library lanterns and search the shelves reserved for the newest medical publications. At last I find the book I am seeking: the most recent volume from Thomas Sydenham. It is a slim book, for which I am thankful. There is no time to spare in finding a treatment for Jonet. I have come here directly from my visit to that wretch Aikenhead, pausing only to send a brief note to Mistress Dundas telling her the cause of Jonet's illness. Now I take the book from the shelf, find an empty desk in the reading room, and apply myself to Sydenham's clear accounts of the symptoms and treatments for the most novel afflictions torturing the population.

I am so absorbed in my reading that I am only vaguely aware of the other people moving about the library. After a time though I grow conscious of someone standing behind me, peering over my shoulder. I turn in some annoyance, and see that it is Dr Maxwell.

'Ah, Carruth, I thought it was you,' he says.

'What the devil do you think you're doing, watching over me like a schoolmaster?'

Maxwell smirks. 'Now, Carruth, don't condemn me for taking a scholarly interest in your reading matter. He pulls out a stool from a nearby empty desk and sits down. The whole movement is conducted with an effortless animal grace, like a cat stretching before settling on its favoured cushion. 'What is it you're puzzling over?'



‘I’m looking for an antidote for an excess of... the Spanish fly.’

He laughs loudly enough to draw censorious looks from several of the other readers in the room. This does not appear to concern him. He leans both elbows on the desk and rests his chin on his hands. ‘Never had the need of it myself. Surely not you, Carruth? Is your lovely wife demanding more than you can supply?’

I will stay calm although my face must be aflame. He knows nothing, after all. I suppress the memory of my most recent humiliation – only last night. All hope dashed again. Maxwell *means* nothing by his comment. It is no more than the flippant crudity of one who fancies himself a wit. ‘I know that these matters give you great amusement,’ I say, ‘but I have a young patient in grave danger of her life, so if you can contribute something wise on the subject I beg you do so now.’

Maxwell considers this for a moment. ‘The Spanish fly. *Lytta vesicatoria*. Spirit of camphor, as I recall, can ease the inflammation.’ His mouth twitches with a smile. ‘Did I ever tell you about the time I was called to treat the Laird of... let’s call him Laird N. An old man with a young wife. The poor old lad had taken such a dose of Spanish fly that he rose up and couldn’t droop down, if you get my meaning...’

‘Spirit of camphor, then,’ I say, cutting off his reminiscences.

He points at the book in front of me. ‘That’s Sydenham’s latest, eh? He’s a great advocate of camphorated tincture of opium. The opium will calm the agitation and ease the pain. That might do the work for you.’

‘I’ve not used it before.’

‘Keep the dose low – only a drop or two in watered wine. You don’t want to kill the girl.’

I rise and put the book back on the shelf. Camphorated tincture of opium is a novel treatment, and one I do not have in my own dispensary. I must find an apothecary – I suppose it is only fair to give Fenton the custom – and equip myself with this new medicine.

Maxwell follows me out of the library. ‘I may as well keep you company, Carruth. I only came to the library in search of some diversion.’

‘Have you no work to attend to?’

Maxwell shrugs. ‘There’s some dull meeting of the Royal College later,’ he says. ‘I suppose I must show my face. Have you not been invited to become a Fellow?’

‘No.’ I jog down the library steps and out onto the street.

Still Maxwell follows me. ‘I’ll put in a word for you, if you like.’

I cannot trust myself to reply with civility, and stride on in the direction of Fenton’s place of business. Maxwell looks unconcerned at my silence and keeps pace with me, nodding at acquaintances as we pass them, raising his hat to an inordinate number of ladies. At last a group of younger men hail him, and invite him to join with them in a nearby coffee house. He parts from me with an exuberant bow and continues with his new, more admiring companions. Their laughter drifts across the crowded street. It seems that all heads turn in his direction.

Fenton seems pleased to see me, and anxious to hear what I have discovered about the cause of Jonet's trouble. 'James Aikenhead, eh?' He shakes his head sadly.

'Do you know him?'

'He used tae have his shop just across there. A decent enough body, but no sense with money.'

He listens carefully as I describe the noxious blister beetle and the suggested remedy. I say nothing about Maxwell being the source of the suggestion regarding camphorated tincture of opium.

'I can make some up readily enough,' Fenton says. 'Shall we proceed?'

When I return to the Dundas residence I find Jonet badly agitated, although Mistress Dundas declares that the poultice I prepared earlier has given some relief. The girl tosses on the bed, wide-eyed and frantic as if in the grip of a waking nightmare. A brief examination shows that there has been no improvement in the blistering of her secret parts.

'Fetch a pint of weak wine,' I order. 'I will lace it with a new treatment recommended by the best Cambridge men.'

Mistress Dundas does as she is bid. When she returns with the cup of wine I take it from her and add two drops of camphorated opium. The room fills with the clear, healthful forest smell of camphor. 'See if you can sit her up, Mistress Dundas.'

The girl is raised readily enough and I hold the cup to her lips. She drains it thirstily, and I signal for Mistress Dundas to lay her back upon the bed. Within a few minutes she has calmed, her breath slowing into the deep, easeful rhythms

of sleep. 'That's a marvellous draft you've given her, Dr Carruth,' Mistress Dundas says, leaning over and stroking Jonet's hair.

'It should subdue her disturbance of body and mind for some hours, but we must then see if it has eased the terrible inflammation of her more delicate regions.'

Mistress Dundas leads me down from Jonet's attic bedroom. 'I told my husband the news you sent me about this apothecary and his vile pastilles,' she says. 'He said he wanted to have a wee word with you.' She shows me into a cramped study with a desk piled elbow-deep in documents, and her husband, William Dundas, barely visible behind them. He rises to shake my hand. His face is an angry red, made fiercer looking by a jet-black wig in the London style.

'I'm minded to take this Aikenhead fellow to law, Dr Carruth,' he says without pausing for any niceties. 'He has cost me dear. I've had to engage a new servant in Jonet's stead, and no doubt you'll have a bill for me one of these days.'

'You are the advocate, Mr Dundas,' I say. 'I can't imagine you need my advice on matters of law.'

He fixes me with a beady look. 'Aye, but should not Aikenhead be pursued for selling dangerous medicines? Surely you have a view on that?'

I think of Aikenhead, cringing and tittering as he showed me his wretched collection of treatments. Nothing would please me more than that his type be held to account for their recklessness, and it might advance my standing with the Fellows of the Royal College. Still, it will not do to have William Dundas

think he can direct me. 'You make a good point, Dundas,' I say. 'Let me give it some thought.'

Dr Irvine will find nothing exceptional in my calling on him. It will be no more than a courtesy to thank him for referring Jonet Stewart's case to me. We can discuss her progress. I can tell him about the treatment I devised for her. I walk straight from Perrett's Court to his residence, and am advised by the servant that I will find him at the Royal College of Physicians. It is less than a quarter-mile from Dr Irvine's house; long enough a walk for me to compose myself, and prepare my words.

The College is still half-covered with rickety scaffolding. A stonemason is perched like a crow on the highest part of the structure, chipping with his chisel at an architrave above one of the windows. My feet crunch on brick-dust as I walk up the front steps, and the building echoes with the rat-tat-tat of the carpenters' hammers. A grim-faced porter signals for me to follow him up the stairs to the first floor. 'Now, sir,' he says when we turn into the comparative peace of the corridor. 'How may I help you?'

I explain my purpose, and he nods. 'Dr Irvine likes to come here for his noon refresher, although if I had my choice I'd stay well away until these labouring men have finished their work.' He leads me further along the corridor, up another flight of stairs and stops in front of a half-opened door. 'I've a visitor here for you, Dr Irvine. It's a Dr -' He turns and looks at me questioningly.

'Carruth,' I repeat.

'Dr Carruth.'

'Send him in, man,' Dr Irvine calls. He sounds in good spirits.

The porter ushers me into the room. As I walk in Dr Irvine rises from his seat at a small table and reaches out his hand to me. 'Young Carruth!' he exclaims. His handshake is crushing. 'You find me labouring at my papers, and sustaining myself with a drop of *uisge beatha*.' There's a bottle on the table with a well-filled tumbler beside it. 'You'll join me, of course?' He doesn't wait for my reply, but lifts an empty snifter glass from the windowsill, rubs it clean with his pocket-handkerchief, and pours a generous measure of whisky into it. He hands me the glass, raises his own, and we drink each other's good health. The whisky scalds its way down my throat. 'Sit down, Carruth, sit down. What think you of our new premises, eh?'

'Most impressive.'

'And what brings you here this fine day?' He turns his face to the uncurtained window and basks in the sunshine like a cat. It is a fine day, I realise. I have been so preoccupied I have not even noted the mildness in the air.

'I wanted to thank you, sir, for recommending me to William Dundas in the case of his unfortunate servant-girl.'

Dr Irvine nods. 'She'd quite defeated me, and I recalled your interest in - *intimate mortifications*.' He gives a little smile as he speaks, but it does not irk me as it might have done on any other man's face.

'I've treated her with an array of medicaments, but the thing which has been most efficacious has been tincture of camphorated opium. Her pain is greatly lessened. I am hopeful she will live, but whether or not there will be lasting damage I cannot say.' I swallow down the rest of my whisky.

Dr Irvine refills my glass. 'An odd malady, don't you think?'

‘And I know who caused it.’ My face feels hot. I wish he would open a window, but then I suppose we would be troubled by the sound of hammering from the workmen. ‘She consumed a dangerous tablet made by an apothecary called Aikenhead.’

Dr Irvine raises his eyebrows. ‘And what ailment was this treatment intended to cure?’

I drink some more of my whisky. I scarcely notice its burning in my throat now, although it sits uneasily in my stomach. ‘Aikenhead called it his *pastille espagnole*. The Spanish fly, in the form of a sweetie, the better to appeal to young women.’

‘Designed to heat the blood of the lassies, eh?’

‘Indeed. But ill-judged. Ill-made. This Aikenhead is a reckless fellow. On his uppers. I fear he has put profit before the health of his customers.’

Dr Irvine stares into his whisky tumbler, frowning as if in deep thought. ‘If these *pastilles* are so dangerous I’m surprised we haven’t seen more cases such as this one.’

That had not occurred to me. I curse my own stupidity. ‘Perhaps they disagreed with the girl’s constitution. That will be the case with one in every hundred medicaments.’ I see the prospect of bringing Aikenhead to law recede. None of us – physician or apothecary – wants to encourage every dissatisfied patient to seek redress. We would all be the worse for it.

‘And yet,’ says Dr Irvine, ‘it seems to me that a powerful substance such as the Spanish fly should not be sold willy nilly to any that ask for it.’

‘You think there should be some... control over it?’

‘Aye. Only a qualified man should have authority to prescribe it, don’t you think? There are other considerations too. Morality, decency... It should only be made available to married people. God made such substances as an aid to conjugal felicity, not as a tool of debauchery.’ Dr Irvine drains his tumbler and sets it down on the table with undue force. ‘Let me give this some consideration, Carruth. You may know we’ve been troubled by apothecaries selling all manner of medicines they know little about. Our misguided patients flock to them, thinking to save themselves a doctor’s fee. It may be that Mr Aikenhead is the very man to be made an example of.’

By the time I reach home I am hot and perspiring. It is past lunchtime, and my head is light with hunger and throbbing from the effects of the whisky. I climb the stair to the dining room and find the table laid but no food served. When I step out of the room I see Isobel, peeping round the door of her parlour. ‘Will you come in, Robert? There’s a girl come about the situation. Her name is Susan.’

In my muddle I think at first that she means the situation with Jonet Stewart and Aikenhead’s *pastilles espagnoles*, but then I realise she is referring to our search for a servant. I follow her into the parlour.

The young woman rising from her seat to greet me is clearly from the lower classes. Her cloak is cheap, albeit reasonably clean, and I suspect she is not the first owner of her bonnet. Her hair, I note, is black as a raven’s wing. There’s something impertinent in the tilt of her head. ‘I heard you were after a housekeeper,’ she says.

I can’t place her accent. Ayrshire, perhaps? ‘How did you hear of this?’



Isobel touches my arm. 'I had asked Mother to keep an ear out for a reliable girl in search of a place.'

'We servants talk to one another,' the girl says. Her face is expressionless. No hint of insolence now, but there is something unreadable in her eyes. 'I have a letter of reference. A good one.' She nods over to Isobel, who I notice is holding an opened letter.

'Well, let us all sit down,' Isobel says, 'and I shall read what this letter says.'

'I am from the north of Ireland,' the woman says, settling herself in her chair. 'I was in service there, near Carrickfergus.'

'Why did you leave?' Isobel speaks without raising her eyes from the letter.

'I thought I'd have better chances in Scotland.'

That can't be the whole reason. There'll be a faithless sweetheart, or an ill-tempered Laird, or some other cause. Perhaps the lady of the house mistrusted those dark, watchful eyes.

Isobel puts the letter down and looks at her. 'So, Susan,' she says. 'You must work hard in this house, for you will be the only servant.'

'Yes, miss.'

I glance over at Isobel. She has made this decision without reference to me. Of course. It is for the wife to manage the servants. I must shape myself to what it is to be a married man. 'Might I suggest,' I say, and hesitate when both women turn to stare at me – 'that we engage Susan for a trial period. Let us say a week.'

Susan looks down at her hands. For a moment I think she means to object. But no.

'That seems sensible, sir. But I'll get a week's pay, even if I don't suit you?'

'Of course.'

She nods. 'Then we are agreed.'

## Thomas

I'm sitting on the warm step out in the close. I close my eyes and look up at the sun, because that way all I can see is red. Dada says that's because my eyelids are thin as paper and full o' blood, and the sun shines right through them like it shines through coloured glass. He says I must never look at the sun with my eyes open, or it would burn my eyeballs clean away. I open my eyes just a wee bit, and then a wee bit more, but the light hurts me, so I look down. Every time I blink it's like I see a flash o' that light again. I've maybe blinded myself. How will I tell Dada, after him telling me not tae do it? I'll need tae be led about for the rest o' my days. Katharine will have tae do that. I blink some more and my eyes come back tae normal.

Keep-count Man is sitting beside me, writing in his wee book. He mutters tae himself. Only stops when he licks the tip of his pencil. Mutter, mutter, mutter. I cannae make out what he's saying. The pages in his book are all covered in marks and lines. He sees me looking. 'Aye, *regardez vous*, wee lad,' he says. 'Do you ken what I'm keeping tally o' here?'

'No, mister,' I say.

He points a grubby finger at the pages. 'It's all those as is killed,' he says.

'Right-hand page for our ones, and left-hand page for their ones.'

I look closer at the book. Both pages are near full o' marks and lines.

'Do you ken your numbers, wee lad?'

'Aye.'

'Tell me how many is killed, then.' He hands me the book.

'Does each mark mean one killed?'

Keep-count Man cackles with his mouth wide open so I can see the gaps where he used tae have teeth. He wags his head and pokes me in the shoulder. 'You dinnae ken as much as you think you do, eh?'

'I'm only asking. How else will I find out?'

He stops laughing and snatches the book back from me. 'Each o' these 'uns is one dead,' he says pointing at a row o' four marks. 'When the tally comes tae five, I put a line through the four, like I've done there.' He runs his finger along a line of marks. I can see that they're in sets o' four, with a line drawn through each one.

'They look like wee gates,' I say. 'And each one means five killed?'

'Aye. You have it now.'

I count the gates on the right-hand page. 'Forty-four o' ours killed? Is that right?'

He nods, his eyes all full o' light and glitter. 'And what about their ones?'

Quickly I tot the numbers on the left-hand page. 'Only thirty-five.' I feel like I do when I'm losing a game against Katharine.

'Dinnae worry, wee lad. The score will be better balanced by the end o' this day, for there's three o' their ones tae be hanged in the Grassmarket.'

Just then a window opens in the tenement up above us. We both look up. Dada pokes his head out the window. 'Thomas,' he hisses. 'Take this for me, will you?' Dada ducks back in, and the next thing I see at the window is a big satchel with a bit o' rope tied around its handles. It tips over the edge and dangles for a moment, then slowly, slowly, gets lowered down. I jump up and run over tae take hold o' it when it gets near enough for me tae reach. I steer it

tae the ground. Dada keeks out again. 'Untie the rope, son,' he says. I do as I'm bid, and Dada pulls the rope back up.

Keep-count Man has been watching the whole performance. 'Are youse for flitting, wee lad?' he says.

'I dinnae know.' I hope not. I hate flitting.

Dada appears at the door. He's come down the stair so quietly I didn't hear him. I run over tae him, but stop short when he puts his finger tae his lips. He takes me by the hand and we creep along, staying close tae the wall o' our tenement. 'Run over and pick up the satchel,' he says when we get near it. Keep-count Man is watching us. He catches my eye and winks. I pick up the satchel like Dada asked and bring it back tae him. It's heavy – so heavy it near tugs the arm off me. Dada takes it, and we carry on with our creeping until we reach the entry. 'Good work, Thomas,' says Dada. 'Out we go.'

We slip out the entry and intae the wynd. Once we're up at the big road Dada walks faster with me trotting after him holding his coat-tail. I start tae cry, thinking I'll never see Katharine or Anna again. Dada stops, sets the satchel on the ground and hunkers down tae talk to me. 'We're not running away, Thomas,' he says, looking all sad and serious. 'You don't think I'd run off and leave your mother and your sisters behind, do you?'

I stare down at the pavement, for I don't want him tae see that that's what I *did* think. He takes hold o' my chin very gently and lifts my face up tae look at him. 'I'd never do that, Thomas, no matter how bad things get.' His eyes look all watery. Then he smiles and springs up. 'Today, son, we're going to make some money.' He lifts the satchel and marches off.

I run along behind him. 'How will we do that, Dada? I mean, Father?'

‘Watch and learn, my boy. Watch and learn.’

We reach a crossroads where a wide street and a narrow street meet. There are people everywhere, pushing and elbowing. A preacher is standing on one corner, guldering about Jehovah and damnation. Beside him there’s a man selling brandy by the spoonful. He takes a penny pay and holds the spoon tae a customer’s lips like Mother does when she’s giving us a purging medicine. The customer slurps the brandy down. Then the man wipes the spoon on his breeks and turns tae the next in line.

‘Here’s a fine spot for us,’ Dada says, pointing to a grand building with a wide, low wall around it. ‘Up we go!’ He jumps up and reaches tae pull me after him. ‘Open up the satchel now, then stand up straight and look appealing.’

I unfasten the satchel. It’s packed with wee bottles and cardboard pill-boxes. ‘The best physic in Edinburgh,’ Dada shouts. ‘Only sixpence a cure, ladies and gentlemen. Sixpence a cure! Yes indeed, Aikenhead’s Universal Medicine promises regularity of stool, relief of all known pains, prevention of fever, calming of the nerves and lifting of the spirits. And all for sixpence! I have it in tablet form. I have it in liquid form. Whichever your preference is, that I can supply.’

Some o’ the passersby stop and listen. Dada has told me tae look appealing, but I’m not sure what that means. Should I put on a happy face, or a sad one? A woman smiles at me, and nudges her companion. ‘Look at thon bairn,’ she says.

‘Och, he’s like a wee angel,’ her friend replies.

I have an idea. I reach intae the satchel and take out one bottle and one pillbox. I hold them both up, one in each hand, so that the crowd can see what

they'll be getting. The smiling woman hokes out her purse and takes out a coin.

'How often must it be taken?' she calls up to Dada.

'Once a day for prevention, madam, and three times a day for cure. Is it the tablets you want, or the liquid?'

'Liquid will go down easier,' she says, and hands him the money.

'Give the lady her medicine, Thomas,' Dada says, and I pass the bottle over to her with a little bow. Dada winks at me, quick and clever, so that no one in the crowd can see. He's pleased with me.

We sell another bottle, and then some tablets, and then I lose count o' what we sell. But as quick as it began, the selling stops. Everyone starts moving away, turning up towards the far end of one o' the wide streets. It's as if they're being sucked up intae it. The preacher stops preaching and follows them. The brandy-man serves one more customer — it's a tall man. I think I ken him, but I cannae mind from where. He takes his spoonful o' brandy and walks off, with big long steps like a horse. I mind him now. The bad man. He has his hat pulled down low, like he did that day in Dada's shop. He turns around and looks at me and Dada. I'm glad when he's out o' sight. He goes the opposite way tae everyone else.

'We may pack up now,' says Dada. 'We'll hardly sell anything more.'

'Where are the people all going?' I ask.

'They're away to the Grassmarket.'

What was it Keep-count Man said about the Grassmarket? I peer up towards the end o' the street, but I can see nothing only people, packed even tighter than they are on market day. Drums are thundering. There's another sound that starts quiet and gets louder, like the wind roaring over our roof on a stormy night. I

realise it's the crowd – they're making all that noise. Oh, aye, the hanging.

Three of their ones are tae be hanged, that's what the Keep-count Man said. My insides are trembly. I feel like I could step off this wee wall and skirl up intae the air like a bird. 'I want tae see the hanging,' I shout.

'You don't, Thomas, you don't,' Dada says. He has the satchel closed up.

'Come on now. We can buy bread on the way home, and some sugar-candy.'

I jump down from the wall. 'Please, Dada! Let's go up tae the Grassmarket.'

I grab his free hand and try tae pull him.

'No, Thomas.' He's not moving, no matter how hard I tug. 'Stop that now, afore I get cross with you.' His voice is louder than I've ever heard it – angry-loud, like Mother always sounds. I look up at him and his face is all frowns and lines. I've never seen that face on him before. My eyes feel stingy.

He hunkers down in front o' me and takes me by the shoulders. 'Don't cry, Thomas. Crying is for bairns.' He's not so angry now.

'Why can't we go to the Grassmarket? Just for a minute. Just to see.'

'To see three poor men dance from the end of a rope?' Dada shakes his head.

'It would give you bad dreams, Thomas. And me too. Come along now. Let's see what your sisters say when we come in the door with a bag of sugar candy.'



## Dr Carruth

I wake early and ill slept. The room is still dark beyond the bed curtains. My mouth is dry and my head heavy. Too much port wine last evening. Another vain attempt in the marriage bed. Tonight I will abstain from strong liquor.

There's a tap on the door. I hear it open, and the soft tread of feet on the floorboards. It must be Susan, I suppose. She's at the fireplace, redding out yesterday's ashes. Somehow she manages to complete the task quietly. The rasp of the brush and the scrape of the shovel are strangely soothing. A few moments more and I hear the crackle of a new blaze. The arctic chill in the air thaws a little, and I am suddenly very glad to have a servant again. I suppose Isobel must have instructed her to set the fires in the morning. With a pang of embarrassment I realise that Susan must therefore be aware of our sleeping arrangements – Isobel in the main bedchamber, and I skulking in the return room at the top of the stair. Pray God she is discreet. She has a closed-up look, like a woman capable of keeping a secret, but looks mean nothing. What was it she said that first day she came to us? Something about servants talking to each other?

Isobel and I sit opposite each other at the table, each with a bowl of porridge in front of us. I take a spoonful. It has a gritty texture, and barely any taste. Isobel grimaces as she samples hers.

'Didn't her letter of reference say she was a good cook?' I whisper.

'A good *plain* cook,' Isobel whispers back, with the ghost of the old sparkle in her eye.

I force myself to eat more, watching Isobel as she does the same. I can't help but stare at the movement of her throat as she swallows, and imagine the food sliding down into the hollows of her gullet, her stomach, her gut. Her collarbones jut beneath her fine skin, so sharp and well defined that I can see them as clearly as if they were laid before me in the dissecting room.

I clear my bowl in haste, and rise to go. 'I'll call at the Dundas house this morning, and see how young Jonet fares.'

'Stay a moment, Robert,' Isobel says. Her voice is calm but there is an urgent look on her face.

I freeze, and rest my fingertips on the tabletop. I am unsure whether or not to sit down again. 'What is it?'

She looks up at me, and for a moment I see a flicker of impatience. It is sufficient to make me lower myself back into the chair.

'This... way of living. Is it to remain so always?'

'What do you mean?'

Isobel takes a deep breath. 'I have little experience in the ways of the world, but I know that this is not what a marriage should be.'

I curse myself for sitting. The chair is like a cage now. I am trapped. 'We get along well enough, do we not?' I say. How feeble my voice sounds.

She fixes me with a look from those clear eyes. 'Was this always your intention? That we should live as... mere companions?'

I shake my head. A memory intrudes. One day, during our courtship, we found ourselves alone as we walked the land around her father's place in Lauder. We came upon a fallen tree. I sat myself down and was surprised and delighted when Isobel sat on my knee. The nearness of her, the warmth of her

body and her sweet, musky smell had my head spinning as if I were the worse for drink. I could not help but kiss the bare skin of her neck and bosom – even the thought of it now throws me into a kind of swoon. I cannot bear to look at her.

‘Robert,’ she says now, ‘I want to be your wife – your proper wife. To bear your children, if it is God’s will. If that is not what you want then we must... attempt to undo the mistake.’

‘How so?’

She shrugs, and looks down at the table. ‘Separation. Annulment. We have grounds for it.’

I stand up again, stung into action by this last barb. ‘I would have come away on our wedding night, but you would not let me. You could not bear the shame, you told me, the humiliation. Will it not be so much the worse now that near a month has passed?’ I hesitate for a moment, imagining the response of all our acquaintance if we took such a course. Isobel might be an object of pity, returning dejected to her father’s house, but the true mortification would be mine to bear. Non-consummation through lack of the virile spirit. That would be how the courts would frame it. How Maxwell and his ilk would laugh. Dr Irvine and all those other gentlemen physicians at the Royal Society – would they ever countenance me as one of their own? And my patients – those genteel ladies who looked to me as the very exemplar of all a man should be... I would be ruined.

I am so absorbed in my thoughts that it’s a moment before I notice that Isobel has not replied. She is staring down at her half-finished breakfast. ‘I will not go on like this,’ she says quietly. ‘When we had no servant... at least then it

was a matter between the two of us, but now - ' She looks up at me, with a strange, brave look in her eye. 'Is there something in me that you find repugnant? You are familiar with... the female form. More so than I am...'

'The fault is mine.' I know she will not be comforted by such empty gallantry, but I cannot find the words to explain my revulsion.

'Share my bed tonight,' she says. 'Not for... Merely as bedfellows. Perhaps if we become accustomed to each other...'

'I know this is a matter of great importance to you,' I blurt out, 'as it is to me, but I really must attend Jonet Stewart. May we discuss this later?' It is a coward's escape, and from the look she gives me she knows it too.

Jonet Stewart is greatly improved, propped up on her pillows and sipping from a posset pot with Mistress Dundas's assistance. Now that she has her wits back she is reluctant for me to examine her secret parts, but Mistress Dundas upbraids her until she consents. I find the blistering much diminished, and cover her up again. 'Have you made water today, Jonet?' I ask.

'Aye,' she says quietly, not meeting my eyes.

'And did it cause you pain to do so?'

'Not so much as afore, doctor.'

'Then I'd say you're mending well.' I pat her hand. The skin is rough and flaking. Her hair hangs in dry hanks about her shoulders, and I see that a great number of strands have been shed onto her pillow. I fear that the poison of James Aikenhead's *pastilles espagnoles* may yet be inflicting damage on her body. 'Now, Jonet, I must tell you that I know what has caused this affliction.'

She looks up at me, her dull eyes suddenly bright with fear.

‘You ate some tablets.’

‘I never did, sir.’

‘Och, Jonet,’ Mistress Dundas interjects. ‘Don’t add lying to your sins. Dr Carruth found the carton in your trunk, and he’s tracked down the very man who made them.’ She gives me a sharp glance.

‘Don’t be afraid, Jonet. You are not in trouble – you’ve already paid a heavy price for any foolishness.’

‘I didnae eat any tablets, sir.’

‘You may have thought that they were sweeties.’

‘Oh!’ she says, lifting one hand to her mouth.

‘Did you eat some sweeties, before you became ill?’

She nods.

‘How many did you eat?’

‘The whole package. I didnae want to share.’

‘Greedy girl,’ scolded Mistress Dundas.

‘And how many were in the carton, Jonet? Do you recall?’

Her voice when she replies is so low I can barely hear her say, ‘A dozen, sir.’

Mistress Dundas tuts in disgust.

‘Jonet, how did you come by these sweeties?’

She turns her head away from me.

‘Were they a gift from a sweetheart?’

‘Oh no, sir,’ she says in alarm.

‘But a gift from someone?’

She falls silent again.

I judge that she is in no state to be further pressed on who gave her the *pastilles*. I could force the matter, bully her into offering up the name, but that would be unkind. It can wait until she is stronger. ‘Well, whoever gave them to you, did they warn you that you should only eat them one at a time?’

‘No, sir.’ She closes her eyes. Her face is more pallid than before. My questions have exhausted her. It is clear, though, that whoever gave her the tablets – and I am not convinced that I believe her denial of a sweetheart – they either did not know of their danger, or they knew and did not care. If the former, then more blame must fall on James Aikenhead, for selling such an item without adequate precaution.

I advise Mistress Dundas to continue with the treatment at a reduced dosage, and take my leave. Mistress Dundas follows me out of Jonet’s room. ‘Is your lady wife receiving visitors?’ she says, without preamble. ‘I would be pleased to call on her. Her mother and I know each other a little.’

‘I am sure she would be delighted,’ I say, although I am sure of no such thing.

If I could find a way of delaying my return home I would do so, but I cannot. I have two patients with appointments to be seen in my consulting room before noon. At least that will give me good reason to avoid conversation with Isobel for a little while more.

I let myself into the house and go straight to the consulting room to prepare for my patients. The fire is lit, and the room smells of lavender and beeswax. Susan must have been at work. I ring for her, and sort through my papers while I await her arrival.

There's a soft tap on the door – I am beginning to recognise it as hers – and she comes in. 'Ah, Susan. I expect two patients this morning. When the first arrives – it will be a lady with her daughter – please show them in to me here. If the second patient should arrive before I am done with the first, you must seat her in the dining room.'

'The fire's out in the dining room, sir,' she says. 'Madam told me not to set it until dinner time.'

What is it in that tone I don't like? Some hint of criticism of Isobel's household management? I look directly at Susan's face. It is closed. Or not closed exactly... perhaps I am reading too much into it, and she simply exemplifies the dumb, bovine demeanour of the servant. 'Indeed I would not want a fire lit in the dining room when in all likelihood there will be no need for it. This is a comfortable household, Susan, but not a wasteful one.'

'Yes, sir.' There's a flicker of something – a challenge? - in her eyes as she speaks.

My patients arrive in due course. The first is a mama with her daughter who has not yet experienced her *menarche* in spite of reaching the age of eighteen. I diagnose suffocation of the uterus, and prescribe a daily infusion of certain herbs renowned for their power to provoke a woman's courses. The second patient is a merchant's wife who has brought forth eleven offspring – of whom eight are still living – as well as at least half-a-dozen miscarriages. She is suffering a continual flux of blood, which I deem little wonder. When I have finished with her I sit on at my desk, writing up my notes. I consider if there is any other way I may respectably avoid Isobel for another while, but every option smacks of cowardice, so I rise and make my way upstairs.

As I walk along the landing I hear voices from the parlour. I open the door and both Isobel and her mother turn to look at me. 'Is that the time already?' Isobel says lightly. 'Mother, will you stay to dine with us?'

'Indeed no,' my mother-in-law says. 'From what you tell me that new girl of yours hardly has the wit to make a meal for two stretch to three.'

'Well, we must give her a chance.' Isobel still has a slight air of awkwardness in her role as mistress of the house. I glance at both women, trying to assess if there has been any confidential discussion between them. The idea of Isobel's mother being privy to our difficulties – to my failing – is unbearable. My only consolation is that Isobel is as mortified as I am by the situation. I doubt that she would wish to share our shame with anyone – even her mother. Still, I wish that my in-laws would make an end of their visit to Edinburgh. They took a house off the West Bow for the weeks before and after our wedding, and show no inclination to return to Lauder.

My mother-in-law rises. 'You may be reassured, son,' she says to me, 'for I had a word with her when I came today, and let her know that she'll have me to deal with if she tries any shortcuts.' She sets her mouth in a firm little pout. The skin around her lips puckers like a wrinkled apple.

Isobel sees her mother out and we sit down to our meal. We are silent as Susan serves us, and I feel a sense of relief when she leaves the room. I must, as Isobel says, give her time, although I doubt if she will ever become like the old servants in Isobel's father's house at Lauder, who fit as comfortably there as if they were family.

We make desultory conversation as we eat, never approaching the topic that occupies both our minds. I have a sense that she will not open it again – not



today, at any rate. 'Isobel – ' I begin, although with what end in mind I do not know. I've no sooner said the words, and observed the manner in which her body suddenly tenses, when there's a rap at the front door.

Isobel sighs – whether in relief or exasperation I cannot tell – and we await Susan's arrival with word of who is calling at this time of day, when every respectable family will be at table. At length she comes into the room.

'It's a Mr Aikenhead to see you, sir,' she says.

James Aikenhead twists his hat in his hands, smiling anxiously down at his son. We are all three standing awkwardly in the hallway. 'I knew you were most anxious, Dr Carruth, to know who it was had bought my *pastilles espagnoles*, and it was my deepest wish to oblige you, which I would have done if my books had been in their customary order, but what with my recent reversals...'

'To the point please, Aikenhead,' I snap. 'Though it hardly matters now, as the girl's life is saved. Still, I should like to know what rogue tried such a wicked trick on an innocent young lassie.'

Aikenhead places his hand on his son's head – the lad has no cap, I notice. 'It's thanks to my Thomas that the mystery is solved, sir. He recalls an ill-favoured fellow who bought some of my pastilles. Wee Thomas has sound instincts, Dr Carruth. He's what the country folk would call canny. I've learnt to rely on him this long while. Such a judge of character!'

'And who is this "ill-favoured fellow"? Can your son name him?'

'No, sir,' the lad pipes up, 'but I can lead you to where he bides.' He is abominably self-assured for one so young.

‘I have no wish to traipse around the streets of Edinburgh behind a bairn,’ I say to the father. ‘If you’ll be so good as to tell me...’

Aikenhead wrings his hat even tighter – it will be completely destroyed by the time he has finished with it – and offers me his infuriating smile. ‘Ah, that I cannot, Dr Carruth. I would if I could - ’

‘You want money, I suppose?’

He looks shocked, affronted even. I see a flash of long-crushed pride. ‘Indeed not,’ he says. ‘It’s only that young Thomas, clever and all as he is, couldn’t *tell* you where the man bides – he wouldn’t know how to describe the directions to you – but he can *show* you, if you care to follow.’

‘I’ll guide you there, Doctor,’ Thomas says, boldly taking my hand. ‘Come with me.’

His fingers feel damp and warm, and his grip is surprisingly firm for a child. He pulls me towards the front door. ‘Now, Thomas,’ Aikenhead says, ‘Don’t treat Dr Carruth so roughly.’

‘Be so good as to wait for me outside,’ I say, shaking myself free of the child. ‘I must make my apologies to my wife, and then we will see how sound the boy’s instincts really are.’

‘Och, Robert,’ says Isobel, who has descended the stairs, ‘don’t make the poor child wait out in the cold.’ She reaches out her hand to him. ‘Shall we go to the kitchen, my dear, and see if there’s any cake?’

The boy considers her offer for a moment, then takes her hand and trots off with her down the hall towards the kitchen. The door to my consulting room lies open, and the child strays towards it, pulling Isobel with him. ‘You like

books better than cake?' Isobel says, with a lightness in her voice I have not heard these many days. 'What an exceptional young man you are.'

'Such a charming lady,' says James Aikenhead, watching them go. 'You are indeed a lucky man.' His admiration only makes me dislike him more.

## Thomas

So I lead them down the big broad street where the doctor bides. I skitter on like a dropped marley and Dada calls tae me tae slow down. He's all out o' puff the same way Katharine gets. I take a hold o' the doctor's hand again, though I know he disnae like it. He's forgot tae put his gloves on. I wonder how he keeps his skin so soft and smooth, and him a man and all. Mother's hands are rougher than his are. I look up at him as we walk. It's an odd thing that his face is so cross and stern, and yet his hands feel kind. I dinnae think he would hit me, no matter how I vexed him. I dinnae think he would hit anyone.

I lead them back tae Dada's shop – though it isnae his shop anymore, and the sign with the green snake is gone, and the door is all closed up with a sign nailed tae it – and then we set off the way the bad man went that day. Up and down the wynds, past the sign o' the black bull, and the sign o' the golden haired angel. We turn intae the court where the bad man went. The doctor says, 'Are you sure this is the place?'

'Aye,' says I, 'for this is the very place I followed him tae.'

'And which door did you see him go in?' says he.

I march right up tae the door and point tae it. The doctor stands there all confounded. Then he turns tae me. 'Would you know this man again, if you saw him?' he says.

'Aye,' I say. I start tae feel a bit afeard. Dada strokes my hair.

'Don't worry, wee Tam,' he says. 'You're not the one in trouble.'

The doctor raps on the door, all genteel. I like that way o' rapping on the door. That's the way I'll do it, when I'm a grown up gentleman. Someone opens the door, and he speaks in for a moment, and then we all troop in tae a room

piled high with papers. I've never seen so many papers in my life. I wonder what's written on them all. There's a crabbit looking man with a black wig and a red face stood behind the desk. The doctor says something tae him about the bad man who bought the tablets and that makes the crabbit man look even more crabbit and he goes out intae the hall and lets out a gulder. And who should come running but the bad man, galloping intae the room with his big horsey steps.

'This is Chalmers, my manservant,' says the crabbit man. He turns tae me. 'Are you certain he is the man you saw in your father's shop?'

'Aye,' I say.

The bad man – Chalmers – speaks to his master. 'Am I tae answer tae wee daft bairns now?'

'You'll answer to me,' says the crabbit man, poking his finger in Chalmer's chest. 'Was it you who bought those tablets that near killed poor Jonet?'

Dada chips in. 'I'll have a record of the purchase somewhere.'

Chalmers looks near as afeard as I feel. 'I bought tablets alright,' says he, 'but I didnae gie them tae Jonet. Why would I?'

The crabbit man marches around him, head poking back and forth like a pigeon. 'Well I would have thought that was obvious!' he cries. 'You had designs on her, you filthy beast.'

The doctor holds up his hand tae the crabbit man. 'If you will allow me, Mr Dundas,' he says, all calm and steady. He turns tae Chalmers. 'You admit you bought the tablets?'

'Aye.'

'But you did not give them to Jonet.'

Chalmers shakes his head.

‘You bought them, I assume, on someone’s instructions?’ Chalmers makes no reply. ‘So,’ the doctor goes on, ‘you bought them, and carried them back here. You cannot deny that, for we have a witness.’

Chalmers scowls at me and I wish I could run away out o’ the room, but I want tae see what happens next. ‘I dinnae deny it.’

‘Then you must have passed the tablets on to someone else, is that not so? Whoever it was that gave you the money to buy them,’ the doctor says.

At that the crabbit man starts jiggling around again. ‘Who? Who?’ he says.

‘I cannae say.’ And with that Chalmers clamps his mouth shut and says nothing more.

The doctor strokes his chin. ‘Here’s a strange coincidence,’ he says. ‘Jonet will not tell me who gave her the tablets. And now Chalmers will not tell me who he passed them on to.’ He turns to the crabbit man. ‘Who all resides in the house? How many servants?’

‘Servants? Aside from Jonet and Chalmers here, there’s only Miriam the cook.’

‘And your family?’

The crabbit man has stopped his leaping around. ‘Myself and my wife. My daughter, Mary. And young Elizabeth Edmonstone.’ He scowls so hard I cannae see his eyes under his great dark brows, and stomps tae the door o’ the room. We all back away tae the walls tae steer clear o’ him. He hurls open the door and guldery, ‘Mary! Elizabeth! Come down here this instant!’ I’m happy enough tae be hiding behind Dada. No one is looking near me now. They’re all

staring at the door, listening tae the rustle o' skirts and the tap-tap o' lassies' shoes coming down the stair.

Two ladies come intae the room. One has a face plain as cheese and hair that's dark like the crabbit man's wig. But the other one... her hair is the colour o' fox fur and she's bonny. The bonniest lady I've ever seen. I keek up tae see what Dada and the doctor think o' her. Dada's smiling, like he always does, only more so. The doctor looks as stern as ever, but there's a blush on his cheek.

The crabbit man stalks forward. 'Now then, this is a serious business, and I want the truth from you.' He glares at each o' the ladies in turn. 'We know that someone in this house sent Chalmers to buy those wicked tablets that made Jonet so ill. It wasn't me and it wasn't your mother. I very much doubt if it was old Miriam in the kitchen. So that means it was one of you. Come on now! Out with it!'

The plain-faced lady bursts intae tears, and the bonny one gives her an ill-hearted look. 'Surely Jonet and Chalmers can tell you who it was?' she says, her voice all cool and sweet. She takes a wee keek at Chalmers. He looks down at his boots.

The doctor steps forward. 'They seem afraid to speak, Miss Edmonstone.' The two o' them stare at each other. I shouldn't like tae have her stare at me in that way, no matter how bonny she is.

'How strange,' she says. 'Well, I know nothing about it. Do you, Mary?'

Mary sobs even louder, wrestling a handkerchief from her sleeve and covering her face with it. She tries tae say something, but she's gurning that much I can't make out a word o' it.

‘Well, gentlemen,’ the bonny lady says. ‘I hope you’re proud of yourselves, distressing poor Mary like this. I’ll take her back upstairs before she is quite overcome.’ She hooks her hand intae Mary’s arm and guides her out o’ the room. All the men stand gawping.

At last the crabbit man turns to Chalmers. ‘You may pack your bags and go. And don’t be looking wages or a letter of reference.’ Chalmers seems about tae speak, then shakes his head and goes out. The crabbit man looks at Dada. ‘You can be off too, and take that brat o’ yours with you.’

Dada reaches down for my hand and we go out intae the hall, leaving the crabbit man and the doctor in the room. The crabbit man closes the door in our faces. ‘Well, Thomas,’ Dada says as we go back out into the court and head for home. ‘That was an adventure, wasn’t it?’



## Dr Carruth

Isobel listens attentively as I explain the situation. 'So, you see, by drawing Dr Irvine's attention to Aikenhead's recklessness I may have caused deep embarrassment to Mr Dundas.'

'Was it not Mr Dundas who first urged you to action?'

'I suppose he did not know then that his own daughter and her friend were at the bottom of it.'

'You told me he intended to lodge a case against Aikenhead himself.'

'Aye, and he has done, not two days ago. Aikenhead doesn't know it yet – he's not had his summons. The wretched fellow would have been smiling less had he been aware of it.'

'Poor Mr Aikenhead. I feel a little sorry for him.' She looks sharply at me when I scoff at this. 'Perhaps Mr Dundas will withdraw his case, and it will all be hushed up.'

'Dundas doesn't know which way to hop. He's still in a rage at the cost of it all – there's my bill to pay, and Dr Irvine's, and Fenton's.' I remember how Jonet's hair was coming out in great hanks when last I attended her. 'I doubt if the servant girl will be able to work again, and he'll feel obliged to compensate her, so that's another cost for him.'

Isobel nods. 'And he must balance that against the shame of Mary and Elizabeth playing such a cruel trick. Did they say why they did it?'

I feel the heat creep into my face at the memory of Elizabeth Edmonstone, and the look that burned from those hazel eyes. 'Miss Dundas weeps and Miss Edmonstone denies it with such brazen lies...' I stop, conscious now that Isobel is staring at me.

‘You’re blushing, Robert.’

*Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.* The words sound in my ears as clearly as if I were hearing them in the Kirk. Isobel continues to regard me in her clear, guileless way. In the face of such innocence, what can I do but equivocate? ‘I am angry at them – not only for what they did to Jonet, but for their refusal to acknowledge their fault. That Miss Edmonstone... she seems to have them all in thrall.’

‘And Dr Irvine has brought the matter to friends at the Royal College. What do they intend to do?’

‘I don’t know.’ I sink miserably into my chair. We are in the front parlour, awaiting the summons to dinner.

‘Why don’t you write to them?’

‘My views would carry no weight with them.’

‘Dr Irvine appears to think well of you. Write to him and explain that there are some new circumstances come to light. If Mr Dundas withdraws his complaint too, then perhaps poor Mr Aikenhead will be spared from answering a case before the Privy Council.’

‘I’ve no wish to spare Aikenhead,’ I snap.

‘But if he is summoned to answer for his actions, then so must be Mary and Elizabeth. In a public court before the whole town.’

‘Aye.’

She pauses, seemingly deep in thought. ‘Why do you dislike Mr Aikenhead so?’

‘Because he is... careless.’

Isobel raises her eyebrows at this. 'His child though, is most endearing. It would be a shame if the family should suffer for the father's *carelessness*.'

At that the gong is struck for dinner, saving me from making a response.

After dinner I excuse myself and go to my consulting room to write to Dr Irvine. I explain to him the complication: that two young ladies – one a Laird's daughter – are at risk of public ignominy if charges are pressed. In addition, I tell him of my finding that Jonet had consumed all of the tablets at once. This fact puts a different complexion on Aikenhead's wrongdoing. His negligence is not in the formulation of the tablets, but in his recklessness in selling them to all and sundry, without proper instruction as to their use. I sand and seal the letter, then ring for Susan. She slips into the room, soft-footed as a shadow. 'See if you can find a messenger-boy to carry this to Dr Irvine,' I say, handing her the letter.

'There'll hardly be a boy around at this time of the evening,' she says. 'I'll be happy to carry it to him myself, if you wish. Should I wait for a reply?'

I hesitate. It is not usual for a housemaid to be roaming the streets at this hour. 'Will you feel quite safe?' I say.

She smiles. 'I can look after myself, sir.'

'Very well then.' I think for a moment. If I bid her wait for Dr Irvine's response it might look to him as if I am in a state of anxiety. That would not do. 'There's no need to tarry for a reply, but when you return let me know that it is safely delivered.'

A good hour passes. I occupy myself with attending to my accounts. My nerves are aflutter, but I resist the urge to fetch a bottle of port wine from the pantry. My abstemiousness is not entirely a matter of strong will. If I leave this room there is a chance I will encounter Isobel, and I am reluctant to revive either of the discussions we have embarked on today. As if that were not reason enough to stay hidden in my consulting room, I have the beginnings of a sick headache. When I look at my accounts book the letters dance on the page. Every time I blink it is as if a flash of lightning jolts through my skull.

After a time Isobel taps on the door and peeps in. 'I am going to bed, Robert,' she says.

'Goodnight,' I say, not looking up from my work. I sense her waiting for something more. She is, no doubt, weighing up whether to speak or to let matters rest. It is a relief when I hear the door close and her footsteps ascend the stair.

At last Susan returns and steps into the consulting room, still wearing her cloak and bonnet. 'Your letter was delivered, sir,' she says. 'The man told me Dr Irvine was at home, and he would give it him directly.'

'Thank you, Susan.' I hesitate before continuing, 'You were a long time about your errand. I was becoming anxious.' She does not offer any explanation. Pain throbs at my temples and I rub my forehead.

'Are you quite well, sir?'

'Just a headache, Susan.'

She tilts her head to one side and considers me with her inscrutable, dark eyes. 'My mother had a grand remedy for the headache.'

I'm tempted to laugh. 'I'm a doctor, Susan. If I need physic...'

‘It’s not a powder or potion, sir. It’s a rub for the neck. I have some in the kitchen, if you would like me to apply it for you.’

Before I can respond to her she’s left the room. I sit listening to her footsteps recede and then quickly return. She has discarded her cloak and bonnet, and now carries a small tin in her hand. ‘Susan, there is no need.’

‘You may trust me, sir. It’s most efficacious. Just loosen your collar for me.’

I hesitate. All my life I have relied on my moral instinct to keep me from danger. In my student days in the Low Countries, when the wilder young men, like Maxwell, tried to urge me into taverns or even more disreputable establishments, this instinct had held me back. It had not always been easy. There were many nights that I fought with myself before turning my back on the warmth and cheer of the inns of Leiden, and walking alone back to my lodgings. My feelings of loneliness had been profound but salved somewhat by a sense of pride in my own strength of character.

Now I feel again as I did on those nights, standing on the very threshold of something I know to be unwise. But my head *is* aching. I untie my neckerchief and unfasten my collar.

Susan opens the little tin and sets it on the desk in front of me. She pulls my collar down so that the back of my neck is exposed. ‘You’ll feel the benefit of it, sir,’ she says, leaning over to scoop up some of the ointment.

She stands behind me and rubs the stuff into my neck. Her fingers are cool, and I am uncomfortably aware that my skin is prickling into goose pimples. The air is filled with the scent of herbs. I can detect lavender, but there are others I cannot name. The smell is familiar. Susan places a warming pan in my bed every night before I retire and she must infuse the coals with this same

fragrance. She rests her fingers on my collarbone, and presses her two thumbs into my shoulder muscles, circling and pressing in such a way that I don't know whether I am feeling pain or pleasure.

'You're all tied up in knots, sir,' she says. 'No wonder your head aches.'

No woman has ever touched me in this way. I feel drunk with the delight of it, even while a sharp pang of guilt jabs at me, knowing that Isobel is close by, sleeping chastely in her marriage bed. *To be carnally minded is death.* Susan raises her hands to my temples, and strokes them more gently. I sense the heat of her body, only inches from the back of my head. Without meaning to, I lean back until my hair brushes the bodice of her gown. I half expect her to step away, to remonstrate with me, but she does not. It seems to me that she moves a fraction closer. Each time she breathes in I feel her breast touch against me. She glows with warmth. I am a man held under an enchantment. I know I should break the spell but somehow I cannot.

She takes her hands away from my temples and begins to pull my collar up to cover my bare neck. 'Has that eased you, sir?'

I try to answer, but the words will not come. It is as if I have been struck dumb and motionless with the delight of her touch, her soft female presence. I fuss at my shirt in the hope of gathering my senses together. 'Much better, thank you, Susan,' I say. My voice sounds thick. 'Go on to bed now. It's late. I'll close up the house.'

I wait until she leaves the room, then bank the fire. The lamp on my desk still has a little oil left in it, so I use it to light my way around the house checking that the doors and windows are fast for the night. Normally this ritual fills me with a sense of melancholy. It echoes the way in which the spirit

retreats from the dying body and puts me in mind of final things. Tonight, though, is different. For the first time in weeks I yearn for my bed - not for sleep, but for the freedom to let my imagination play on the sensations Susan has stirred by her touch. I climb the stair and hesitate before the door of Isobel's bedchamber. Could the flame that Susan has kindled warm my marriage bed? I am suddenly disgusted with myself. To even think of approaching Isobel with such thoughts seems worse than exposing her to some vile contagion. I turn from her door towards that of my own solitary room.

The next morning I am glad to be busy with house calls. The case of Jonet Stewart has been a topic of conversation among the better sort of person, and my role in her survival has brought me more patients. In spite of all my anxieties I feel a certain feverish lightness in my spirits as I walk from one respectable house to the next, calling on my ladies and easing their discomforts. I decide against attending Jonet herself. She is well-mended now, and after yesterday's *contretemps* I have no wish to return to the Dundas household until matters are more settled.

When I finally enter my own front door I see the coat-stand is laden with capes and cloaks. My heart sinks at the prospect of company. No one was expected today. I am tempted to slink into my consulting room and hide there until the visitors leave, but that would be discourteous, and unkind to Isobel. My earlier good spirits are quite extinguished as I ascend the stair to the front parlour.

Inside the room I am dumbfounded to find Dr Maxwell, Mistress Dundas and Elizabeth Edmonstone. Isobel is sitting bolt upright, and casts me a

pleading look. Her copy of the *Edinburgh Courant* is set to one side on an empty chair. Susan is serving chocolate to the ladies. Maxwell has a glass of Madeira in his ungloved hand. 'Good Lord, Carruth,' he exclaims, 'you look extremely vexed.'

'Indeed not,' I lie, forcing myself forward to greet him. 'Merely surprised. We have so few visitors as a rule.'

'Then I must call more often.' Maxwell bows towards Isobel, with a sly smile on his lips. His glance strays towards Elizabeth Edmonstone. She looks away from him and up at me. There is something practised in her manner, so taunting in the way she deploys her allure. I become aware that Isobel is observing me. At the same moment I find Susan by my side.

'Will you take some chocolate, sir, or some Madeira wine?'

'Madeira,' I say, and take a seat between Isobel and Mistress Dundas. In truth, I have no desire for wine, but dread appearing womanish in front of Maxwell. Susan fills a glass for me, clattering the decanter against the glass. Elizabeth Edmonstone stifles a laugh. Susan's hand shakes as she gives me my Madeira. I glance up at her face and see that it is flushed with anger or embarrassment.

'I was just telling your good lady about my Mary,' Mistress Dundas says.

'She is not unwell, I hope?'

'Unwell?' Mistress Dundas rolls her eyes. 'Snivelling like a baby, and won't come out of her room.'

'I am sorry to hear it.'



‘Indeed. I said to Mr Dundas, I said, “Let us ask Dr Carruth to attend to her, since he’s so good with young ladies.” Of course, it is her nerves that are out of kilter, rather than any physical affliction.’

‘I would be happy to call upon her.’

Mrs Dundas shakes her head and shapes her mouth into a sad moue. ‘Alas, Dr Carruth, my husband won’t hear of it. He says he’ll have enough to pay you as it is. So I said to him, “Are you telling me you’ll pay for a servant to be cured, but not your own daughter? Shame on you sir,” that’s what I said to him.’

We all sit in awkward silence for a few moments. I turn to Elizabeth Edmonstone. ‘*You* are well, at any rate, Miss Edmonstone?’ I hope there is enough ice in my question for it to find its mark.

‘Thank you, yes,’ she says. There’s just a hint of boredom in her voice. I can feel Maxwell’s eyes on me, and sense the smirk on his face.

‘And how is Jonet today?’ I go on. Let her not think I don’t know her role in this cruel business.

‘Jonet!’ Mistress Dundas interjects. ‘Why she’s removed from us!’

‘How so? She’s scarcely fit to travel.’

‘Dr Irvine saw no obstacle. He sent his own coach.’

Maxwell laughs. ‘Oh Carruth, if you could only see your face!’ He glances over at Isobel. ‘You must school your husband better, Mistress Carruth. He must learn the art of hiding his jealousies.’

‘I do not think he is jealous of Dr Irvine,’ she says mildly. ‘Indeed, he admires him greatly. I imagine he is merely taken aback at this intervention, and

concerned for Jonet's well-being.' She smiles over at me, and I feel a rush of gratitude towards her.

'Where has Jonet been removed to?' I ask.

'Well, that we don't know.' Mistress Dundas drinks off the cup of chocolate in one long swallow and licks her lips. 'He said he knew of a woman by the waters of Leith who kept a lodging house for invalids, and that the fresh air would benefit Jonet's recovery.' She sets her cup down. 'It has been most pleasant calling on you, Mistress Carruth. I hope you will visit us some day?'

'Yes indeed,' says Isobel.

Susan shows Mistress Dundas and Elizabeth Edmonstone out – not before Mistress Dundas draws me aside and whispers that her husband has withdrawn his complaint against Aikenhead - and after a few minutes more Maxwell announces he must leave. We pass Susan on the stairs as we go down. 'You're a lucky man, Carruth,' Maxwell says, 'Though your blood must be stirred beyond bearing.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'To have a maidservant with *that* air about her.' He throws me a quizzical look. 'I'd say the vital spirits pulse strong through her veins, eh?'

'She seems a respectable girl.'

Maxwell lets out a scornful laugh. 'Well, you have a fine young wife to keep your attention. I make sure to employ an old and ugly housekeeper, for if I kept a young one I'd be in all manner of trouble, bachelor or no.'

My consulting room is quiet and cold, the fire long since died down. Isobel and Susan have both retired for the night. I have a book open in front of me, but I

cannot take in its content. The question of why Dr Irvine intervened in Jonet's case whirls round and round my head. He has not responded to my letter, but I am sure that his action must be in some way connected with my communication.

There's a rustle on the stair and a tap on the consulting room door – Susan's tap. When she enters I am astonished to see her dressed in her nightgown, her dark hair in a loose plait. She has a shawl wrapped around her, clasped together with both hands. Her feet are bare, and very white against the dark floorboards.

'Are you ill, Susan? Or has something alarmed you?

'Forgive me, sir,' she says. 'I could not sleep for worry.'

'I am sorry to hear that, Susan, but this is scarcely the time...'

'I did badly today, sir, when you had your visitors. Didn't the mistress speak to you about it?'

'No, not a word.'

'Before you came home, sir, Miss Edmonstone complained that the chocolate was bitter. I'm only a housemaid, sir. Good for cleaning and plain cooking, not for waiting on gentry with chocolate and Madeira wine.'

'Susan, please be assured that Miss Edmonstone's opinion counts for little with me. I believe she is a spiteful young woman, with too much leisure at her disposal.'

'I believe you are a good judge of character, sir.'

Her praise is oddly gratifying, but I am conscious that Isobel is sleeping in the bedchamber just up the stair. What if she too is awake, and listening to the murmur of our voices? 'You really must go back to your room, Susan. And don't worry about it another moment.'

‘Thank you, sir,’ she says, fixing me with those inscrutable eyes. ‘You are very generous.’

I am in bed, but I cannot sleep. The night is very still. I wish there were a storm blowing around the rooftops. It would better reflect my state of mind than this heavy, airless calm. When I lie on my side I feel suffocated, so I turn onto my back, and stare up into the darkness of the room. My eyes play tricks on me. Dashes and dots of light dance in front of me, and when I close my eyes they do not disappear.

I might have dozed for a time – I cannot be sure – but I am suddenly wide awake again. There is movement in the house. The creak of a floorboard in the rooms above me. Is someone stirring? I calm my breathing, the better to listen. There is another creak, fainter this time. And then I hear the door to my room being opened.

Somehow I know it is Susan. Her bare feet scarcely make a sound as she crosses the floor, but I can sense that she is coming closer. I can smell that strange scent of hers. The bed creaks as she sits down on it. Her hair brushes against my face as she bends closer and kisses me lightly on the mouth. For a second I am too astonished to move. I try to speak, but she places one finger on my lips and says, ‘It is only a dream, sir.’ She kisses me again, but when she begins to climb under the covers I shrink away from her.

‘What the devil do you mean by this behaviour?’ I whisper.

I sense her sit upright. In the darkness of the room I can just make out the pale gleam of her face.

‘I’m sorry, sir. You are so kind and seemed melancholy. I thought you would like a little comfort.’

‘If I want comfort I’ll find it in my work and my studies and – ‘

‘And your wife?’

‘Get away from me.’

She stands, and it seems that the bed grows cooler as she retreats. A moment later the bedroom door squeaks open and then is shut again. As I lie listening I hear the creak of the stair. There are other sounds from the rooms above me – she must be moving about, climbing into her narrow bed. And then silence.

I lie flat on my back, forcing myself to take long, deep breaths. The pace of my heartbeat grows steady again. Surely sleep will be impossible now? Every nerve in my body feels raw, as if a layer of skin has been peeled away. What can have prompted her to present herself to me in such a way? Does she feel it is the price she must pay for my support? Perhaps not. From what she had said it was pity moved her. True, she had shown concern for me these past days, but still... My innate caution makes me doubt it. She has seen that Isobel and I sleep apart, and come to her own conclusions about the reasons. Perhaps she thinks this will be a way to advance herself. Worse yet, blackmail could be in her mind. I imagine the consequences had I accepted her advances. A threat, perhaps, of revealing my behaviour to Isobel, or to my in-laws. Thank God I withstood temptation. For I must be honest with myself, there was a brief moment when my baser passions might have inclined me to respond. *It is only a dream*, she said. I could have pretended it was so.

Before my imagination continues in this line I admonish myself. I am a Christian man, and my objective has always been that my animal needs would

be contained and sanctified by matrimony. Dear God, I am not yet two months married. How could I even think of breaking those sacred vows, and with a servant girl at that?

Susan presents us with our breakfast the next morning in much the same manner as she always does, with a perfunctory 'Good morning, sir, madam,' and little more. I do not want to meet her eye, fearing I will see some sign of unwelcome familiarity or knowingness. Still, I cannot stop myself from observing her with repeated covert glances. Whether I hope or fear to find her looking at me I cannot say, but in either case I am to be disappointed. She keeps her eyes downcast, and leaves the room quickly.

I eat without relish, although I am hungry, and try to focus my mind on the business of the day. Isobel and I make desultory conversation. However, try as I might, I cannot stop my mind returning to the events of the night before. Should I dismiss Susan? Her behaviour is indicative of a lack of morals. If she is capable of attempting to seduce her employer she will surely have no qualms about making off with any valuables she can lay her hands on. Still, I have not noticed anything going missing about the house. In any case, what explanation would I give Isobel for the dismissal? I cannot let this matter pass though. When Susan clears the table I offer my excuses to Isobel and make my way down the hall to the kitchen.

Susan looks up from the basin where she is stacking the breakfast dishes. 'Would you like a bite more to eat, sir?' she says.

'No, Susan.' I hesitate, realising I have not fully thought through what I am going to say to her. 'I wanted to speak with you about last night.'

‘Last night?’ She frowns, as if she does not understand me.

I feel flustered. ‘There must be no repetition.’

‘I don’t get your meaning, sir. Repetition of what?’

What has got into the girl? I am on the verge of saying outright what occurred in my bedroom, and then realise how deranged it will sound when she is keeping up this pretence of innocence. I must take some other approach. ‘Tell me, Susan, after you retired last night, did you have any cause to leave your room before morning?’

She stares at me, unblushing, an expression of puzzlement on her face. ‘Why would I leave my room, sir?’

This is insufferable. I indicate for her to follow me and march out of the kitchen, across the hall and into my consulting room. Once there I search on the shelves for the family Bible. I do not read it as often as I should, and it takes me a moment to find it among my books.

‘Here,’ I say, setting the Bible on my desk. ‘Swear on the Bible that you did not leave your room last night.’

Susan shrugs, and places her hand on the Bible. ‘I swear by almighty God that I did not leave my room last night.’ As she says the words she looks me in the eye, fearless.

I feel foolish. Ridiculous. She must think me a madman. ‘Very good, Susan. Get on with your work.’

She makes to leave the room, but pauses in the doorway and looks back at me. ‘Did something disturb you in the night, sir?’

‘Yes. I thought...’ I cannot continue.

She stands watching me; her dark hair neatly tied back, her pale body concealed by the dull worsted gown. 'Perhaps it was a dream, sir.'

I stare at her. She has that same fearless look in her eyes. 'Very likely, Susan,' I say at last, 'It was most probably a dream.'



## Thomas

It's all nice and quiet, for Mother is out doing the messages. Anna is feeling poorly, so she's tucked up in bed and Dada has her dosed with medicine. Katharine's staying by her side, tae keep her company. I'm sitting at the table with Keep-count Man, while Dada makes up a remedy for him in the wee dispensary. Dada's left the door open so that he can keep an eye on us. Keep-count Man has got his wee book open. 'Two more o' themmuns go today, young Tam,' he says, making his marks on the right hand page. He talks very soft, on account o' his earache. He's prone tae earache. That's good news for Dada, for the remedy costs tuppence a time.

Dada is grinding up herbs in the mortar, and then stops all o' a sudden. 'Och, what am I doing?' he says. 'I've made it all wrong.'

'You should mind your work, James,' says Keep-count Man. 'Your head's away.'

'Not a bit of wonder,' Dada says. He comes out of the dispensary, opens the window, and throws the ground up herbs out intae the close. 'I may start again.' He stays by the window, looking out. 'Ah now,' he says, sounding happier, 'here's my cousin coming.'

'Which cousin?' I say. I used tae like it when cousins called, but Mother has fallen out with so many o' them that we scarcely see them from one year end tae the next.

Dada turns round tae me, and his eyes are all bright. 'It's your godfather, Thomas. You remember the grand gentleman who came to the shop one day?'

'Him with all the buttons on his jacket?'

‘Aye, the very one. Be a good laddie now, and charm him well. He’s under obligation to you, in a fashion, being your godfather.’ He speaks to Keep-count Man. ‘Don’t you agree, that a godfather is obliged to do right by his godson?’

Keep-count Man snaps his wee book shut and clutches it tae his chest. He looks all around the room as if he’s afeard. ‘I wouldn’t ken that James, indeed I wouldn’t. You may ask a minister if you want the answer tae that conundrum.’

‘Och, never worry,’ Dada says, all kind and calming. ‘You bide there and I’ll make up this new powder for you.’

‘Oh no, James, I cannae stop here.’ He rises from the chair like one o’ those puppets being pulled up by a string, all dangling and shaky. I run tae open the door tae let him out. He skites ontae the landing just as my godfather rounds the turn o’ the stair. The two o’ them look at one another – Keep-count Man in his rags and wrappings and my godfather with his fine jacket and all its buttons - and I don’t know which one’s more afeard. Keep-count Man pushes past him and scuttles away down the stair.

‘Come in, Sir Patrick, come in!’ says Dada, in the voice he used tae use for rich customers.

‘Well, James,’ Sir Patrick says, looking all round him. ‘Is it just yourself and the bairns?’

‘Oh aye, you needn’t be afeard of Helen. She’ll be gone this good while.’ He smiles over at me. ‘Clear a chair for your godfather, there’s a good lad.’

I wonder what chair he means. The last good armchair went away last week when a man came to take it. He gave Dada a shilling for it. All we have left is a bench and two stools. Sir Patrick looks too grand to sit on a stool, but he must sit *somewhere*. I pick the steadier o’ the stools and brush the dust off it with my

sleeve. 'Will you sit yourself here, godfather?' I say, all the while looking up at him with my eyes wide open.

'Thank you, Thomas,' he says, easing himself down. His buttons give a wee jangle as he smooths his jacket. 'Now, James,' he goes on. 'What's this new trouble?'

Dada goes tae his own jacket that's hanging on a hook by the door. He searches through the pockets and pulls out a letter. 'This came yesterday,' he says, handing it tae Sir Patrick.

Sir Patrick begins to read it. 'A summons!' he declares. 'Och, James, what have you been at now?'

'There was this servant lassie took my *pastilles espagnoles* and they near killed her, that's what they're saying. It's hardly my fault if she ate them all at once, is it? Any medicine will hurt you if you take too much of it.'

'The lassie in question being this Jonet Stewart who has made the complaint?'

'Aye.'

'And who are these two women who are charged alongside you? I don't think I know Mary Dundas, but Elizabeth Edmonstone... I'm sure I've heard that name.'

'She's the one that gave Jonet Stewart the tablets.'

Sir Patrick read on through the summons. 'And told her they were sweeties. That's a cruel trick.'

'She's the Laird of Duntreath's daughter, and a right spoiled hinny she is.'

'Jonet Stewart must have a stout heart in her to take action against a Laird's daughter.'

Dada sits down on the other stool. 'Aye, she must.' He rests his head in his hands. 'What am I to do? I haven't a penny to pay for an advocate.'

Sir Patrick sighs. 'And so you call on me.'

'You see how we're fixed, Sir Patrick. I can barely feed the bairns, and that hearth has been empty and cold this last se'ennight.'

'Hmmm.' Sir Patrick glances over at me. 'Are you a good boy, Thomas?'

'I don't know, godfather,' I say. 'Dada – I mean, Father – says I'm good, and Mother says I'm not, so I don't know which I am.'

Sir Patrick gives me a tired smile. 'Very well, James,' he says, rising to his feet. 'I'll pay for an advocate. We may hope he persuades the Privy Council in your favour.'

Dada jumps up and grasps Sir Patrick's hand and starts talking so fast I can hardly make him out, but he's saying *thank you*, and *God bless you* over and over again with a lot o' other words tangled up as well.

As we show him out the door Sir Patrick says, 'Have you told Mistress Aikenhead of this latest misfortune?'

Dada freezes. 'No,' he says. 'Not yet. I know I must, but –'

Sir Patrick nods. 'Aye, I understand. You must pick your moment.'

When he's gone, Dada says tae me, 'Not a word to your mother, eh Thomas?'

'Cross my heart and hope tae die.' I draw a big invisible cross over my chest.

Dada pats me on the head. 'That's the way, Thomas. Now, will you help me make up a cure for earache?'

## Dr Carruth

It is Sunday, and I am breakfasting alone. Susan enters the room.

‘The mistress says she will not go to Kirk this morning,’ she says.

‘Does she say why not? Is she indisposed?’ There has been an outbreak of chills and agues, as there often is at the turn of the seasons.

Susan gives a barely perceptible shrug. I assume that means she does not know the answer to my questions. She clearly cares little either. Is this hint of insolence new? Has it emerged since her night-time visit to me? - the visit she claims never happened. ‘Will there be anything else, sir?’

‘You may clear the table. I have no appetite.’

I go to Isobel’s bedchamber before leaving for the Kirk. She is sitting by the window looking out at the street, an open book lying face down on the sill. ‘Are you unwell, Isobel?’ I say. ‘Would you like me to prepare something for you?’

‘I am quite well, thank you,’ she says without looking at me. She sounds in low spirits.

‘Susan says you are not going to Kirk this morning. What reason shall I give for your absence if the minister asks?’

‘Tell him... whatever you think best.’ She turns and smiles weakly. Her eyes are red-rimmed. ‘I do not think I could endure to be in a press of people today.’

I walk over to the window. ‘It is a pleasant day. I had hoped we might take a walk after Kirk.’

‘You go,’ she says. ‘Do not let me deter you.’ She turns away from me, and resumes her observation of the street.

And so to the Tron Kirk, where the minister devotes a good hour to explaining why it is God's will that the Covenanters be crushed without mercy. No doubt in the hidden fields of Galloway there are wild-eyed Covenanters telling their followers that it is the likes of me who should be put to the sword. Quite what the Almighty thinks on the subject I could not say. I'm not sure I follow the Reverend Crawford's arguments on the matter, although I can understand the practical reasons for suppressing the Covenanters. Religion is all very well until its more fanatical followers threaten our earthly leaders. The Covenanters call their fallen brethren 'saints'. Heaven will be a stern and silent place if they comprise the celestial choir. As the minister preaches on I steal glances around the congregation to see who's there that I know. There's no sign of my mother-in-law and father-in-law, for which I am grateful. I catch a glimpse of Dr Irvine.

The crush of the congregation leaving the Kirk nearly thwarts my plan of crossing paths with him, but I elbow my way through – as genteelly as I can – and feign surprise at the encounter.

'Ah, Carruth,' he says. 'Forgive my not replying to your letter, but I have been rather occupied.'

'I hope Jonet Stewart continues to mend?'

He smiles at me with an expression I cannot fathom. 'Indeed she does.'

'I was surprised to learn of her removal.'

Now he laughs. 'Not as surprised as that rogue Dundas. He'd have happily swept the whole matter under the rug once he found his own daughter had a hand in it.'

The anxiety that has been twisting in my gut settles into the heaviness of despair. 'I must take it then that my appeal for discretion has fallen on stony ground?'

Irvine puts his arm around my shoulders like a father counselling his son. I cannot help but observe the eyes of several parishioners take note of this sign of favour. 'Let us walk together awhile,' he says, and we set off together down the High Street. 'I recall,' he says, once the crowd has thinned, 'that it was you who first drew my attention to Mr Aikenhead's involvement in this case.'

'It was.'

'And you seemed quite passionate in your disapproval of him.'

My mouth feels dry. 'Perhaps I was... too choleric.'

'Your view of Aikenhead has softened?'

'No, but...'

'But now two young ladies – one a Laird's daughter! - are tarred with the same brush. And that makes you uneasy.'

'I would rather not make enemies among the gentry.'

Dr Irvine stops and looks hard at me. 'Is that it? You should have no fear of any man, Carruth. We are all equal in the eyes of the Almighty.'

His complacency infuriates me. 'That is easy to say when you are secure in all your affairs,' I say. 'I am a young man without connections, and I cannot so easily disregard the opinions of...'

'Of your betters?' he says drily.

I cannot reply.

He speaks again, more gently now. 'Tell me, Dr Carruth, what was your father?'

How to answer? Such a direct question leaves little room for anything but the truth. 'My father had a great number of occupations. Sometimes an apothecary. Sometimes... it was he the midwives summoned when a child had died in the womb.'

'Ah. A crotchety man.'

I shudder at the memory of those tools of my father's trade. The hook for drawing out the dead child. The scissors, strong enough to cut through infant bone.

'But a medical man, nonetheless,' he goes on, 'and one who found the means to educate you well. You should take pride in that.'

'Forgive me, Dr Irvine,' I say, keen to leave this subject, 'what of Aikenhead and the... young ladies? How do things stand?'

'Jonet Stewart has made a complaint against them. Summonses have been served. All three come before the Privy Council next week.'

'And was this the reason you removed Jonet Stewart? She would hardly have made her complaint had she remained in the Dundas house.'

'Aye, that might have been a wee bit awkward.' We are at the Netherbow, and Dr Irvine stops. 'Well, Carruth, here I must leave you. It is out of our hands now. The Privy Council must decide the rights and wrongs of James Aikenhead and those two wicked lassies.'

I decide to pursue my early idea of a walk, in the hope of settling the turmoil in my mind. It is for the best that Isobel is not with me, for had she been I would have been compelled to restrict our ambulations to the lower walkways of Holyrood Park, close to the palace. Isobel is not feeble, but a gentlewoman's



attire does not lend itself to strenuous exercise. On my own I am free to climb up the steep paths of Arthur's Seat, and I set off with the notion of reaching the summit. Very quickly I am beyond the popular loitering places close to the palace and taking a wilder route. It still surprises me that one moment I can be among the few Sunday strollers – there are not many of them, for the great majority of the better sort deem it sinful to take exercise on the Sabbath – and the next completely alone, save for the birds that chirp and forage in the gorse. In places the whin bushes grow so high that I cannot see a single spire of the city. I stride upwards, walled in by wild shrubbery on either side. The sun beats down on my head and shoulders, unmitigated by any breeze. I loosen my neckerchief.

At length I reach the spot that I have always judged to be the summit, although given the strange geography of Arthur's Seat there are arguments to be made for several high-points. There is not another soul to be seen, and the moss is dry, so I sit down to rest myself, and look at the city spread out beneath me. The view is clear, the outlines of the buildings sharp as pen-strokes against the cloudless sky. The usual gauze of smoke is absent, what with it being Sunday. Most hearths will be cold today, sanctified by disuse. Looking over toward Leith I can see a cluster of ships anchored in the Firth of Forth. Whether it is the salubrious effect of the fresh air or the stimulation of the exercise, I begin to feel easier about the Aikenhead case. As Dr Irvine says, it is for the Privy Council to decide. If Elizabeth Edmonstone and Mary Dundas suffer some penalty as a result – and I doubt if any punishment would be severe – they have only themselves to blame.

But even while freeing myself from one anxiety, another takes its place. Isobel's well-being starts to prey on my mind. She seemed sound enough in body this morning, but cast down with melancholy. It may be nothing more than the natural despondency women are afflicted with at certain times, but I feel certain the fault is mine. Another more terrifying thought comes - a great number of more dangerous maladies first make themselves known in the same way. All manner of fevers and plagues. I am seized with a momentary panic, remembering one of my patients - a hale young lady who was expecting her second child. One fine summer's day she complained of feeling low in spirits. By the next day she developed an ague, and within a week she was in her grave. I jump to my feet, determined to take better care of Isobel, to reassure her of my devotion, and to overcome - if I can - my incapacity.

I make my way down the hill taking a different, less trodden path. As I round a bend I see a lad and lassie reclining in the shelter of a cluster of whin bushes. Her bodice is undone and her pale breasts are bare to the sun. The boy has his mouth to her nipple, like a suckling babe. I freeze for a moment, fearing to move in case I should be noticed, but they are too engrossed to detect me. As I back away the girl looks up and sees me. Her eyes widen, but she does not cry out or cover herself. Instead she runs her fingers through her lover's hair and smiles at me, as comfortable in her sinfulness as a cat sprawled in front of a blazing hearth.

I stumble on, troubled and stirred by what I have seen. By the looks of her she was a servant girl, making ungodly use of her one day of leisure. I wonder where Susan is today. For one unwise moment I imagine her similarly engaged,

and then push the idea from my mind. These impure thoughts are close to overwhelming me. I hurry home, determined to mend my marriage.

The house is silent when I return. There's no clatter of crockery from the kitchen, none of the bustle of housework. I walk through to the kitchen to find it tidy and vacant. A covered platter sits on the table. I lift the lid and find it contains a selection of cold cooked meats – sliced mutton, a disassembled fowl, fried bacon, stiff and white with congealed fat. A day-old loaf sits beside the platter, wrapped in a linen cloth. I am hungry now, so many hours after my scant breakfast, but I must see Isobel first.

I look first in the dining room, then climb the stair to the first floor and check both the main parlour and Isobel's own, private parlour that leads off it. The rooms are empty, so I continue to the bedchamber. I tap on the door, but receive no response, then open the door as quietly as I can, in case she is asleep.

The curtains are wide-open and the covers pulled up on the bed. Isobel's nightgown is draped over the chair, but otherwise there is no sign of her. I am puzzled, but not unduly concerned. If she is up and dressed she must be recovered.

I go out onto the landing and call her name. No response. I check my own bedchamber, and then make my way downstairs again, for I doubt she would be in the servants' quarters at the top of the house. At length I am back in the hallway. There's only my consulting room to look in now, and I am almost certain I'll not find her there.

And so it proves. But there's a sealed note for me, written in her hand, on the desk.

*My dear husband, she writes. Forgive my absence. After you left for the Kirk I had word from my mother that my father was taken ill – nothing, I believe, that places him in real peril, but enough for my mother to be uneasy and in need of my companionship. Do not trouble yourself on this account. I am sure it will be a matter of days before I return. Your devoted wife, Isobel.* She adds a post-script saying, *My own indisposition seems quite banished by this more pressing concern. Such is the mystery of the human frame.*

I read the note over several times. Is she telling the truth, or is this a means to accomplish our separation? Will this pretence be succeeded by another, and then another? Better that, I suppose, than the public humiliation of an annulment. I could not bear it. That would mean the end of my life here in Edinburgh, for I could not show my face if all the world had heard that my marriage had been undone by my inadequacy. And yet, if this is to be the beginning of gradual uncoupling then the world will notice soon enough, and draw its own conclusions. I determine to put this right. Let Isobel have her few days away from me. When she returns I must – by some means – overcome my weakness.

The house is dark and silent apart from the scratching of mice behind the wainscot. My accounts book is open in front of me, but I cannot give it the attention it warrants. The cause of my distraction sits close at hand in the form of an empty bottle of port wine. Its erstwhile contents fill my belly, heat my blood and muddle my brain. I close my book and prepare to climb the stairs to bed. Susan has not yet returned, so I am obliged to leave the back door unbolted. The idea makes me uneasy. How can I rest knowing the house is

vulnerable? In any case, she *may* already be back. It is possible I have been so absorbed in my studies that I have not heard her come in. It will be best to check.

I take the lighted candle and walk up the first flight of stairs, past the parlours and bedchambers. The final flight of stairs is narrow, the wood bare and unsanded. Up here, in the top floor of the house, are two servants' rooms, and a larger room meant for a nursery. My father found the means to buy this house when it was new built, by which time I was long beyond childhood. I wonder if any infants of mine will ever be nurtured here, or make the walls ring with their childish noise. The futility of such a notion in my current circumstances darkens my bleak night-time mood still further.

The door to Susan's room is closed, and I pause a moment, listening for any sounds that might indicate she is inside. There is nothing, save a few creaks and whistles from the wind around the chimney pots. When I place my hand on the door handle I find my palm is slick with sweat, and I am trembling. I take a breath, and remind myself that this is my house, and I can enter any part of it without permission. I open the door.

The room is empty, the curtains still open from when Susan pulled them aside this morning. There is a half-moon tonight. It is not visible through the tiny window, but its light spills over the bedspread. The room smells richly female. As I might have expected, there is a faint scent of lavender, overlaid with Susan's particular musk of sweat. There's a small willow basket at the end of the bed, untidily piled with linen. Of course. Tomorrow, being Monday, is wash day. That must be her own soiled linen, ready to be cleansed.

A creak on the stairs makes me jump. 'Who is it?' I call out, attempting to disguise my alarm as anger.

'It is Susan, sir,' she says, approaching me out of the shadows. She stands in the doorway, her bonnet and shawl in her hands. Her eyes are dark and glittering by the light of the candle. 'Did you want something of me?'

My mouth is dry. 'I did not know if you were here or not. I didn't want to bolt the door if you were not returned.'

'Well here I am, sir, and I have bolted the back door behind me, so you need have no fear.' She walks into the room and hangs her shawl and bonnet on a hook that had been hammered into the wall.

'You were out late, Susan.'

'The Sabbath is my day of liberty, sir.'

I mumble my goodnights to her, and make my way down the stairs to my own bedroom. My bed is cold – there has been no strangely scented warming pan slid between my sheets tonight. Perhaps it is for the best. My blood is over-stirred. The penance of icy sheets on my skin might calm me.

## Thomas

Dada is dressed in his best coat and wig. 'Fetch me my hat, Thomas,' he says. The hat has a dent in the crown, from when Mother crushed it in a rage. I hand it tae Dada and he puts it on. 'Well,' he says. 'How do I look?'

'How do you look?' says Mother, standing with her arms folded. 'Like the bletherskite you are.' Her mouth snaps shut and she presses her lips together so hard they turn white.

'Will you not come with me, Helen?' he says. He sounds all sad.

'I'll come with you,' I say, but neither o' them is listening. Katharine smiles at me from across the room, and then her face settles back tae looking worried.

'Don't you "Helen" me!' Mother says. 'Anyhow, someone must look after the bairns. I may get used to being on my own, once they have you dragged off to prison.'

'Are you going tae prison, Dada?' My belly feels all trembly. I take Dada's hand. It's sweaty, but I keep a hold o' it.

'Of course I'm not, Thomas,' he says. 'I have to go and see some important gentlemen. You stay here with your mother and sisters.' He pulls his hand away from mine and nudges me towards Katharine.

He goes out then, without another word. I wait until Mother goes intae the other room tae check on Anna, and I'm off. Out the door, down the stairs, three at a time, intae the close and intae the street. I can see Dada walking up ahead, but he cannae see me.

I'm in the biggest room I've ever been in, apart from the Kirk, and a Kirk isn't really a room, is it? This room has a big long table at one end, and a whole

crowd o' cross-looking gentlemen sitting behind it. There are benches and chairs clustered in front o' the long table, and behind that a great press o' people standing. I sneaked in at the back and hid myself in among the crowd. I'm that wee that most o' them didn't even see I was there. One big man put his hand on my shoulder and asked me what my business was. I pointed intae the crowd and said I had a message for my grandfather, and when he looked tae see who I was pointing at I juked down and got away from him. Every time I saw a gap I slipped forward, weaving and ducking tae avoid getting a dig in the eye from some gentleman's sharp elbow. And now I'm near enough at the front. Not so close as tae be seen. I don't want Dada tae get a glimpse of me.

I can see him, sitting in the front row. My godfather, Sir Patrick, is standing in front o' him, and another gentleman beside him, his hands full of papers, who is doing a lot of talking to Dada. The two ladies are sitting at the front too, side by side. I know it's them, for I recognise the colour o' the bonny lady's hair, and so I guess the other lady is her plain friend. They are staring straight ahead, not saying a word tae each other. The bad man I saw in Dada's shop – Chalmers – is there too, sitting a bit away from the ladies.

Someone bangs on the table with three big knocks and everyone quietens down. One of the cross-looking gentlemen opens a big letter up and begins reading from it.

'Complaint by his Majesty's Advocate and by Jonet Stewart, late servitrix to Mr William Dundas, advocate, against the following: James Aikenhead, apothecary in Edinburgh –' *Dada!* I say tae myself, delighted tae hear his name. The gentleman goes on reading but I don't pay much attention tae the words until the crabbit man who was so cross with me when I led Dada and the doctor



tae his house springs up from one o' the benches and walks forward tae the table. He bends over and whispers tae the gentleman. There's a lot o' head-shaking and finger-pointing and then he goes back tae his seat.

'Mary Dundas,' the same gentleman says, 'your father tells me you are no more than a witness to this wrongdoing. Is that the case?'

'Aye, sir,' says the plain girl, so low I can scarcely hear her.

'And are you willing to tell us all you know?'

'I am.'

The bonny lady turns tae stare at her. From where I am standing I can only catch a glimpse o' the look on her face, but I see enough tae know I would not like anyone tae glare at me in that fashion. My blood would turn cold as ice.

The gentleman at the table nods. 'Then you may go and sit with your father until we ask you to speak.'

She stands up and skitters over tae her father as if she's being chased.

'James Aikenhead,' the gentleman says, in a stern booming voice like a minister. 'It is complained of you that you made and sold poisonous tablets designed to work strange wanton affections and humours in the bodies of women. What do you say to that?'

Dada stands up, twisting his hat in his hands. 'Not poisonous, my Lord, indeed not. At least, no more than any other medicament taken in over-large amounts.'

'But designed to inflame female lust?' The gentleman looks as if he's eaten something sour.

'Well, yes, I suppose...'

'And you do not deny selling these tablets to any who requested them?'

‘That’s true enough.’

‘Did you offer any warning to your customers that the tablets could be noxious if over-consumed?’

Dada fidgets. I cannot rightly see his face, but I’m sure he’s smiling, the way he always does when trouble comes calling. ‘I believe I did, my Lord. At least, I’m almost sure... But any person of sense would know to take only one at a time, don’t you agree?’

‘Hmmm. Tell me, Mr Aikenhead, do you recognise any in this room as bought these tablets from you?’

Dada turns and looks all around him. I duck behind a stout man in case I’m seen. ‘I couldn’t tell you,’ Dada says. ‘There were a brave few customers. I can’t remember them all.’

The gentleman glances over at a thin, pale man dressed in dusty black clothes who is scratching away with a pen. When he stops writing the gentleman turns back tae Dada. ‘You may sit down.’ He turns tae the bonny lady. ‘Miss Edmonstone,’ he says. ‘We will hear from you now.’

She stands up. The room is very quiet. There’s a rustling sound when she smoothes her skirts.

‘It is complained of you that you sent the servant man Chalmers to buy Mr Aikenhead’s tablets, and that afterwards you gave these tablets to Jonet Stewart, saying they were a sweetmeat. Do you admit it?’

‘Certainly not.’

There’s a stir of whispers around the room.

The gentleman looks perplexed. ‘You deny it then?’

The bonny lady gives a big, loud sigh. 'Clearly I do.' There's a sour tone to her voice, like Mother's when she's in a foul mood.

'Miss Edmonstone,' the gentleman says, 'I have a fair number of people say you *did* send Chalmers to buy the tablets, and you *did* give them to Jonet Stewart. What say you to that?'

'They are lying. Many people do, to save themselves from blame.'

I think about what she has said. She's right. I've lied more times than I can recall tae spare myself a hiding. Then I wonder if *she* is the one who's lying, and her accusing others o' it is only tae put the blame on them. I feel all muddled in my head about it, so that I don't know who is lying.

The gentleman looks as confused as I am. He nods tae her to sit down, then looks at all the people sitting at the front o' the room. 'Which of you is James Chalmers?'

The bad man stands up. 'I am,' he says.

'And you were formerly a servant in the house of Mr William Dundas?'

'Aye.'

'Why did you leave his employ?'

He doesn't speak for a moment, then says, 'I was dismissed.'

'For what reason?'

'Because I bought thon poisoned tablets that Jonet took. Mr Dundas said I had designs on her, but I didnae.'

'Why did you buy the tablets?'

There's another big silence. 'Someone asked me tae.'

'And who was that someone?'

He says nothing.

‘Come along, man,’ says the gentleman. ‘The person accused has been named here in court. You have but to confirm what we already know.’

Chalmers still doesn’t speak, but he turns and points at the bonny lady.

There’s a wee shiver goes around the room. The bonny lady is sitting bolt upright, looking straight ahead.

‘Are you saying it was Elizabeth Edmonstone?’ says the gentleman.

‘I am.’ He stares at the bonny lady with the oddest expression on his face.

‘Did you know when you bought them that the tablets were composed with the aim of provoking lust in women?’

‘Aye.’

‘And what reason did Elizabeth Edmonstone give for wanting them?’

Chalmers swallows so hard I can hear the sound of the gulp. ‘She said her blood was cold, and she feared that when she came tae be married her husband’s attentions would not please her, so she thought it wise tae stir her passion ahead of time.’

All the people standing around me shift and shuffle and turn tae whisper in each other’s ears. The cross-looking gentleman bangs his hammer again, and everyone quietens down.

‘I must observe, Mr Chalmers,’ he says, ‘that seems a queer sort of conversation for a Laird’s daughter to be having with a servant-man. Did you not think that yourself?’

‘I dinnae ken what I was thinking at the time, sir.’

‘But you must have known you should not have been buying those tablets – for her or anyone else.’

‘I’m a servant. I do as I’m bid.’

The gentleman frowns. 'And when you bought these tablets from Mr Aikenhead, did he give you any warning about how they should be taken?'

'I dinnae think he did, but I cannae mind rightly.'

The gentleman sighs. 'Then I bid you sit down,' he says. When Chalmers has sat the gentleman says, 'I'd speak now with Mary Dundas.'

The plain lady gives a kind of yelp, and turns tae her father. He pushes her up out o' her seat.

'Now then, Miss Dundas,' says the gentleman, 'you claim you are no more than a witness to this carry on. Tell me what you saw.'

She starts tae speak, but her head is bent and her voice very low, so that I cannot hear a word she's saying. 'Speak up, Miss Dundas!' says the gentleman, sounding none too pleased.

She straightens up and speaks louder this time. 'Elizabeth Edmonstone said to me, "I've got a wee treat for Jonet," and I asked her why, seeing as she was always teasing Jonet, and mocking her.'

'And what did she say to that?'

'She said it was time to make amends.'

'What happened then?'

'She showed me the box of sweeties, and I said it looked more like something from an apothecary, and she said they were special sweeties that were beneficial to the health.'

'Were you with her when she gave them to Jonet?'

'Aye. We were in the parlour, just Elizabeth – Miss Edmonstone – and I, and Jonet came in to tend the fire. She said to Jonet, "Here's a wee remembering for you," and fetched the sweetie box out of her skirts. Then she said, "Dinnae tell

Mistress Dundas, for she'll only scold. And dinnae tell the other servants, or they'll all be wanting gifts." And when Jonet went out Miss Edmonstone looked very pleased with herself, and clapped her hands together, and said, "Now we'll have some diversion," but when I asked her what she meant she wouldn't say.'

'Did she give Jonet any warning that the tablets – the sweetsies – were not all to be consumed at the one time?'

'No, sir. Not in my presence.'

The gentleman pauses and waits for the clerk to finish his writing. 'So, Miss Dundas,' he goes on, 'tell me what happened when Jonet became ill.'

The plain lady seems unsure what to say. She looks over at her father, who does no more than shrug at her. 'Why my mother summoned Mr Fenton, the apothecary, and when Jonet was no better my father sent for Dr Irvine.'

'And did it occur to you that Jonet's indisposition might be related to the tablets?'

'No,' she says, shaking her head. 'Not at first. But then... Miss Edmonstone took me aside and told me to say nothing about the tablets, or else we would both be in bother.'

'Miss Dundas, you have heard Miss Edmonstone here today deny procuring these tablets and giving them to Jonet Stewart. Who are we to believe?'

'Me, sir, and James Chalmers, and Jonet Stewart. That's three against one.'

The gentleman raises his eyebrows. 'Thank you Miss Dundas. Your grasp of numbers is commendable.' He glances round the room. 'Am I to take it that Jonet Stewart's state of health leaves her unfit to give testimony?'

A stout gentleman in the grandest wig I've ever seen rises up. 'My Lord, I regret that is the case. However, I can confirm that Miss Dundas's statement concurs with Jonet's.'

'Thank you, Dr Irvine. May I enquire after Jonet Stewart's prospects for a full recovery?'

'Very poor, my Lord. She will live, but I fear she will never earn her keep again.'

The gentleman slams his fist on the table. 'Another drain on the charitable resources of the city!' He points at Dada and the bonny lady. 'It's the two of you should be held accountable, eh?' Everyone starts whispering again, until the hammer is banged on the table.

A tall skinny man stands up and shouts, 'Session adjourned while my Lord and the Council consider their response.' The people around me push and press towards the door, and I am carried by them the way a leaf is swept along the gutter when there's a fall o' rain. We all pour out into the street. I can't spot Dada's among all the hats and wigs o' the gentlemen, so I climb up on the steps tae give me a better view. Still no sign o' Dada, but I see one familiar face – Dr Carruth, standing stern and handsome, a good way apart from the crowd. The stout gentleman with the grand wig approaches him, and pats him on the arm. Dr Carruth still disnae look happy. He glances over in my direction, so I wave at him. When he notices me he stops short, stares at me for a wee minute, then turns away and walks off. I jump down and chase after him, just for the devilment, because he looks as if it would annoy him. But once I'm off the steps I can't see him anymore. I push through the crowd in the direction he

went, but there's no sign o' him. Then I see Dada, standing with Mr Fenton by the corner, so I go tae him instead.



## **Dr Carruth**

I am even more uneasy now that I've seen the Aikenhead boy, waving at me as cheerily as if I were a benevolent uncle rather than the instrument of his father's undoing. For a moment I consider taking my leave of the whole proceedings, but I am anxious to know the outcome. Dr Irvine is hopeful that Aikenhead will be censured, and the authority of the physicians strengthened. He murmured something about inviting me to dine at the Royal College tomorrow evening. I should be gratified, but the pleasure is lessened by the way my role in Jonet's cure has been overlooked. There was not a mention of me, when it was I who tracked down Aikenhead, and I who formulated the course of treatment that saved Jonet. I suppose I must be consoled that my lady patients know the truth of the matter, and their word carries more weight with other ladies than any posturing by Dr Irvine. Perhaps he considers an invitation to dinner (and in time - who knows? - the offer of admission to the fellowship) to be adequate compensation. Perhaps it is.

We have been summoned back into the Privy Council chamber. Once again I find a place in the gallery, far enough back not to be noticed. The Earl of Linlithgow resumes the presiding chair. Some of the other Privy Councillors chat to each other, but his Lordship does not join in. Instead he frowns down at the many papers that sit before him on the table, leafing through them as if to refresh his memory of what they contain. A few minutes more pass. I can see Aikenhead, seated in front of the table in conversation with another man - his advocate, I presume. Elizabeth Edmonstone is straight-backed, but she turns her head from time to time as gracefully as a swan. Her russet hair is almost hidden

beneath her bonnet, so that only a flash of it is glimpsed each time she turns. It seems to me that she is scanning the room to see who is watching her.

Lord Linlithgow bangs his hammer and the room comes to order. 'James Aikenhead, James Chalmers and Elizabeth Edmonstone,' he says, and waits as the three rise to their feet. 'We find you guilty of an open and manifest crime, and conclude that you should be subject to exemplary punishment. However, before sentence be passed we charge the Royal College of Physicians to examine the case more thoroughly. You may all be called to the College for further questioning, and should you attempt to evade such investigation by departing the city, then you will be judged outlaw.' He turns towards Dr Irvine, who is in his former seat at the side of the room. 'Dr Irvine,' he says, 'May I have your assurance that this will be pursued with all vigour?' Dr Irvine stands and bows his assent. Another bang of the hammer and we are dismissed.

The sunshine is bright and the crowd from the Council chamber seem inclined to loiter in its warmth. I catch sight of James Aikenhead standing slack-jawed at the bottom of the steps. His son has him by both hands, talking at him but – from what I can see – not being heard. I want only to be away, but find my path barred by Elizabeth Edmonstone. 'So, Dr Carruth,' she says, her eyes glittering with fury. 'You will be content to see me ruined.'

'Why would I want such a thing?'

'To punish my father.'

I am bemused. I know nothing of her father, save that he is Laird of Duntreath. 'You are quite wrong, Miss Edmonstone,' I say. I could tell her how I tried to have the complaint withdrawn, but something about her temper and

arrogance makes me disinclined to placate her. Her face is pale but I can see an angry blush on her neck.

‘Liar!’ she hisses back. ‘I’ve noted how you fawn over Dr Irvine. You would do anything to gain his favour.’

‘What has Dr Irvine to do with your father?’

‘Do not pretend you don’t know.’

She tries to turn away from me, but I cannot let her insult go unanswered. ‘I am glad to see you suffer, Miss Edmonstone,’ I say, ‘but not for the nonsensical reason you suggest. You are a spiteful, mendacious girl. The type who delights in tormenting any who are unfortunate enough to serve her.’ I remembered how she had laughed at Susan, taking pleasure in her discomfort.

Suddenly her anger is gone. ‘My father will be written to,’ she says. ‘No doubt Mr Dundas is already scurrying home to sharpen his quill. And where am I to go? Do you imagine I can return to the Dundas house, to break bread with that simpering coward Mary?’

Her change of mood disconcerts me. ‘You must have other friends here.’

‘Precious few.’ She turns on her heel and walks off as briskly as her skirts will allow.

I trust I appear calm, but in truth I do not feel it. My heart is pounding at the injustice of her accusations and - what else? Is there some ignoble exultation at seeing such a girl humbled? I am still feeling unaccountably disturbed when I see Isobel, not twenty yards away. She is with her mother, and they are deep in conversation, casting occasional glances my way. I must speak to them of course – what could be more natural? – and am on my way over to them when I am accosted by Dr Maxwell.

‘So, Carruth,’ he says, ‘I saw Irvine beaming at you as warmly as the sun in the sky. I take it an invitation to join the Royal College will be forthcoming?’

‘I really couldn’t say,’ I snap.

Maxwell smiles, as if at some private joke. ‘I suppose you’re feeling sour that our role in saving that lassie’s life was painted out?’

‘*Our* role?’ He has a damned cheek.

He narrows his eyes. ‘I believe it was I who dropped the hint about camphorated tincture of opium?’ There’s an uncharacteristic chill in his voice.

My face heats with humiliation. ‘Of course. I quite forgot.’ I pause and force myself to say, ‘Forgive me.’

Maxwell’s warmth returns as suddenly as it departed. ‘Consider yourself forgiven, Carruth,’ he says. ‘Let he who is without sin, and all that.’ He takes out his handkerchief and mops his brow. ‘It’s insufferably hot, don’t you think? And it only April! Will you join me in taking some liquid refreshment?’

‘Thank you, no,’ I say, conscious of how stiff I must look and sound. ‘My wife and her mother await me here.’ Isobel and my mother-in-law have drawn closer while we have spoken. I catch Isobel’s eye, but her expression is unreadable.

‘Ah!’ says Maxwell, turning to look at them. ‘The delights of feminine company must surely outweigh the pleasures of the tavern.’ He raises his hat to the ladies, and is on his way.

I stand in awkward speechlessness for a moment. At length I manage to say; ‘I had not expected to see you here.’

‘Indeed,’ my mother-in-law says, arching her eyebrows in that knowing manner that irritates me so.

‘I recalled how concerned you were about this case,’ says Isobel. ‘How did it go?’

‘They were all found guilty, except Mary Dundas. She turned evidence against Miss Edmonstone.’

We fall into silence once more. At length my mother-in-law says, ‘Isobel, my dear, I do not like to leave your father unattended for so long.’ She gives me a steely look. ‘Will you escort us home, *son*?’

I am ushered in to the front parlour, where my father-in-law sits sweltering before an unseasonably large fire. He has a rug tucked around his legs, but apart from an overheated expression on his face seems quite well. It is a relief to me that his supposed illness was not an invention of Isobel’s. ‘The womenfolk fuss so, Robert,’ he says apologetically. ‘I dare say if you had charge of my health you’d prescribe fresh air and exercise.’ I rather like my father-in-law. In theory he is a minister of religion, but in practice he spends as much of his time as he can away from his damp country Kirk. The diversions of Edinburgh are more to his taste than the dismal fields of Lanarkshire. Isobel’s marriage has offered him the opportunity of many weeks in town.

We exchange some banalities until the ladies come in to the room. I feel myself tense, and wonder if my father-in-law detects the change in atmosphere. Isobel observes me intently, but I cannot decipher her mood from her expression. As we all sit I notice a glance pass between her and her mother.

Talk turns to today’s sitting of the Privy Council. ‘So Elizabeth Edmonstone is to be punished?’ Isobel’s mother says. ‘What will they do to her, do you think? Not prison?’

‘I doubt it,’ I say. ‘A fine, most likely.’

‘Her father will hardly have the means to pay her fine,’ my father-in-law says.

‘Is he poor?’ I say.

‘No more than any other Laird, but he’s inconveniently detained in Stirling prison.’

‘What was his crime?’

‘He harboured a Covenanter preacher in Duntreath Castle. More fool him. He knew what trouble that would cause him, in these times.’

I remember Elizabeth Edmonstone’s anger at me today. Her claim that she had no friends in Edinburgh. Perhaps fear lay behind that fury. ‘Do you know, sir, if there is some enmity between her father and Dr Irvine?’

My father-in-law frowns as he considers this. ‘Dr Irvine had a bad time of it from the Covenanters when he was a young man. Before your day, of course. He wouldn’t sign the second Covenant. They threw him in prison for a time, deprived him of his land, chased him from the country for a few years. Perhaps some of the Duntreaths were involved. They’ve always had a fanatical streak.’

And now the shoe is on the other foot. Covenanters are persecuted, and their former prey are in the ascendant. Dr Irvine did not appear to be a man driven by vengeance, but perhaps, when the opportunity presented itself, he could not resist.

The conversation lulls. There’s no sound but the crackle of the fire. ‘And is all well in the Pleasance?’ says my mother-in-law? ‘What of the new servant – will she satisfy?’

Sweat prickles on my forehead. 'I do not know. We husbands must be guided by our wives in these matters.'

'Very true. I have said to Isobel that our Hetty has a niece looking for a place. If this Irish lassie of yours does not please, you could do worse than young Agnes. But of course, I must not interfere in your household, *son*.' My mother-in-law stands up. 'And on that point, I must speak to Hetty about the mutton.' She nods towards her husband. 'You should lie down, or you'll overtire yourself.'

'I've no need to lie down, madam,' he says. She stands staring at him and something in her glance brings about a change of heart, for he casts aside his rug and rises. 'Well, perhaps a brief nap would be beneficial,' he mutters, and follows his wife from the room.

Isobel and I are alone, and the silence continues. 'Dr Irvine has invited me to dine at the Royal College tomorrow evening,' I say, to fill the emptiness.

'What of Mr Aikenhead?' she says. 'What will become of him and his family?'

'I... I do not know,' I admit. I long for some approving word or glance from her. These last days my vital spirits have been sinfully aroused – by Susan, by Elizabeth Edmonstone, by that shameless servant girl I saw with her sweetheart – chasing away images of death and decomposition. I think I might be able to embrace Isobel – sit her on my knee, as I did on that golden day of our courtship. Of course I know – as any physician must – that beneath her pale skin the thousand animal processes of the human body continue, but that knowledge no longer renders me powerless. 'Isobel,' I say, reaching forward to take her hand. 'Will you come home soon?'

Oh the look she gives me! There's compassion in it, and something like disappointment. She does not turn away, but the expression in her eyes tells me that some door in her heart has been closed. 'A few more days, perhaps,' she says. 'When mother is content to spare me.'

I cannot face home. A dark house, a lonely bed. And Susan. These last nights since Isobel's departure I have lain abed, half dreading, half longing for another visit from Susan, another *dream*. I dare not return there in my current mood. I turn instead towards that part of town where the taverns are respectable enough for me not to lose my name by entering them. I find one that offers grilled chops along with liquor and go in, intent on calming myself with port wine, but glad to cloak my thirst in the respectable desire for victuals.

What time it is I do not know. I bang on my own front door, and wait a good ten minutes before Susan opens it. She is in her nightdress, with a shawl draped around her shoulders. The candle in her hand nearly flickers out in the draught from the street.

'You have no business going to your bed before the master of the house gives you permission to do so,' I say, and realise, with some mortification, that my voice is slurred.

'The hour was very late, and you'll expect me up in a few hours to light your fire and heat your water,' she says, staring at me evenly.

Insolence. Damned insolence. I sway towards her, and she puts her hand against my chest. At first I think she means to keep me at bay, but her fingers grip at my coat and she pulls me closer. She turns her face up to me, and lets her



lips brush against mine. This time I do not rebuff her. She kisses me as no decent woman would, and I return in kind. After a moment she stops and says, 'The mistress told me I could go to bed, sir.'

'The mistress?' I am shocked into sobriety. 'Has Isobel... my wife... returned?'

'Yes, sir. Some three hours since. You have likely woken her with your battering of the front door.'

'Why did you not tell me sooner?' I lower my voice to a whisper. 'Before I... disgraced myself?'

She smiles. 'I could have let things go further, sir, had I wished. Be thankful I stopped you when I did.'

I have not the presence of mind to address Susan's behaviour now. I walk upstairs, pleased to find my steps are steady. I am not some drunkard staggering and stumbling through his own house. Down in the hallway Susan bolts the door and creeps up the stair behind me. On the landing I pause for a moment looking at the closed door of Isobel's bedchamber, then turn into my room and close the door. I tear off my clothes, throwing them carelessly to the floor. Susan can tidy them tomorrow. I pull on my nightshirt and climb into bed, suddenly wearier than I ever remember being.

I must have slept – the brief, deep sleep of the drunken man. When I wake I have no sense of how much time has passed. The bedsheets are damp with sweat.

For a moment I lie there, gripped by a strange and thrilling impulse, and then throw the bedcovers off and climb from the bed. I have an odd sense that this

scene is not real. I feel as if I am observing a painting – although it would be an odd work of art that showed a man stood stock-still in his nightshirt, and the looming bulk of a bed, and the dark distance of the floor between him and the door. Every pulse of my heart makes me conscious of the ebb and flow of the blood around my body. My skin thrums in time to my heartbeat.

I go to the washstand and splash my face with cold water. Slowly I walk across the room towards the door. Outside in the hallway I pause. In front of me is Isobel's bedchamber door, and at the end of the corridor lies the narrow staircase to Susan's room. I hesitate, unsure which path to take.

She has left the curtains half open, and a moonbeam shines across the floor. I see her head turn on the pillow as I come into the room. There is an air of watchfulness about her that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. As I take the few steps to her bedside she sits up.

'I hoped you would come to me,' she says.

'I'm afraid I have not behaved as I should.'

'Hush now,' Isobel says gently, and pulls the covers back to admit me to our marriage bed.

## Thomas

Me and the Keep-count Man are sitting on our usual step in the sunshine. He's in bad form, leaning against the doorpost with one hand tae his sore ear. Dada isn't well enough tae make up his powder, and it's the Sabbath, so there's no other apothecary who'll provide it in Dada's stead.

I copy the Keep-count Man and lean against the other doorpost. My eyes are heavy. Dada was coughing all night, and Anna was gurning, so none o' us had much rest. I close my eyes. It's odd the way you hear sounds differently when your eyes are shut. There are wee birds nesting in the roof, and their cheeping and chirruping is very clear. Someone in hobnail boots walks along the wynd beyond the close. From somewhere inside our building I can hear the scrape o' a spoon in a bowl, over and over again, as if the person holding the spoon is eating their cold Sunday porridge as quickly as they possibly can.

Katharine is standing in the space between me and the Keep-count Man. I must have fallen asleep for a minute, because I didn't hear her come down the stair. She hunkers down. 'Can you go and sit with Father for a while?' she says. 'He keeps asking for you.'

I stand up and stretch. My arse is numb and my feet are tingling from sitting so long. I stamp my feet tae bring them back tae life. 'Houl' your noise!' the Keep-count Man says, jerking upright and glaring at me. He touches his ear carefully and makes a face as if it hurts him.

Katharine guides me intae the hallway and we go upstairs. 'Mind not to be prattling at Father,' she says. 'He's no strength for replying to your nonsense.' She sounds cross.

'If he speaks tae me, may I speak back tae him?'

‘Of course you may, you clout.’

We go intae our lodgings. Mother is sitting looking out the window, and Anna is asleep on the floor in front of the fireplace, tucked around with a quilt. I head tae the bedchamber where Dada is resting. He turns his head towards me, and smiles. ‘Och, there you are, wee Tam,’ he says in a whispery voice. ‘Come and sit down on the bed.’

I do as he says. I wish I could take his hand, but Katharine has him all happed up in his blankets so that all I can see is his face. ‘Are you cold, Dada?’ I say.

‘No,’ he says. ‘At least, I don’t think so.’

‘Do you feel better?’

‘Aye, I do.’

‘That’s good,’ I say. His skin looks an odd colour. Like candlewax.

For a while he doesn’t speak, and then says, ‘What day is it, Thomas?’

‘Sunday, Dada. Father.’

He smiles. ‘You may call me Dada if you wish, son. If it makes you happy.’ He shifts in the bed, wriggling his arms free o’ the blankets. ‘Did you go to Kirk this morning?’

‘Aye. Katharine took me.’

‘Good boy,’ he says, and starts tae footer with the edge o’ his blanket, twisting and tugging it.

‘I prayed tae God that you would get better soon.’ I reach out and touch his restless hands. His fingers are cold and damp, like the wall beside the stair is, winter and summer. He stops fidgiting, and closes his eyes. His chest rises up and down as if he was running, as if every breath was hard tae find. I feel sleepy

again. There's a wee fire smouldering in the grate, and the window can't be opened. I lie down on the bed beside him. There's enough room for me. Mother will shout at me if she comes in, on account of me having my feet on the bed, and me with my shoes still on, but I'm too sleepy tae care. Katharine will be pleased, though, for I'm keeping Dada company, but not bothering him with chat.

I decide tae pray again, even though I'm not in the Kirk. I think it's allowed tae pray anywhere – even in bed – but I suppose prayers work best if they're said in the Kirk. *Please God*, I say, *make Dada get better soon*. I know it will work, for the minister said so today. *Ask, and it shall be given you*, he said. *Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you*. He said a lot o' other things too, for he always talks for ever such a long time, and I fell asleep in the middle o' his sermon and only woke when Katharine squeezed my hand. *Ask, and it shall be given you. That's what it says in the Bible*, the minister told us, *and the Bible is always right*.

## **Part II**

### **The Trial of Thomas Aikenhead**

15462.13.9  
S A T Y R

AGAINST

Atheistical Deism

With the Genuine Character of a

D E I S T.

To which is Prefixt,

An account of Mr. AIKINHEAD's NOTIONS,

Who is now in Prison for the same Damnable APOSTACY.

By MUNGO CRAIG S. Ph. & Sac. Th. 29

Do you Admire, why with Satyrick Rhyme,  
I Scourge the whiffing Scoundrels of the Time?  
To be resolv'd, turn o'er the Page, and you  
The Justice of my Quarrel will avow,  
And must Adopt the same; if you be not  
A silly Fop, or Epicurean Sot.

*Semper ego auditor tantum? nunquamque reponam  
Vexatus toties* -----

*Si Natura negat, facit indignatio versum  
Qualemcumque potest. Quales ego* -----

Juven. Sat. I.

EDINBURGH,  
Printed for Robert Hutchison, and Sold at his Shop in the Head  
of the Colledge-Wind. M. DC. XCVI.

**1696**



## Genesis

*In the beginning was the Word, but the Word was a lie. Aye, the very first time He spoke to Adam, God told a lie. 'Dinnae eat from yon tree,' He said. 'If you eat frae it you'll die.' The Bible puts it better, mind. More poetical. 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.' But Adam ate the fruit, him and his wife too. And did they die? They did not. Well, not right away. According to that same old book, Adam lived to be nine hundred and thirty years of age. That's a quare stay of execution, eh?*

*The thing about questions is, once you've asked one you cannae stop asking. You may learn sense enough not to ask them out loud - it disnae take too many hammerings from the schoolmaster to teach you that - but the questions keep coming, crackling across your mind like lightning until you daren't open your mouth for fear that sparks will shoot out.*

***Indictment against Thomas Aikenhead***

***November 1696***

*Thomas Aikenhead, you are indicted and accused, at the instance of Sir James Stewart, His Majesty's Advocate for His Highness's interest, and by special order of the lords of His Majesty's Privy Council, that by the laws of God, and by the laws of this and all other well-governed Christian realms, the crime of blasphemy against God, or against any of the persons of the blessed Trinity, or against the Holy Scriptures, or our holy religion, is a crime of the highest nature, and ought to be severely punished.*

*It is of verity that you, Thomas Aikenhead, shaking off all fear of God and regard to His Majesty's laws, have now for more than a twelvemonth past made it, as it were, your endeavour and work in several companies to vent your wicked blasphemies against God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, and against the Holy Scriptures, and all revealed religion.*

*It is manifest by the evidence obtained from witnesses that you are guilty of horrid blasphemy, railing against and cursing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and impugning and denying the truth of the Holy Scriptures, and quarrelling and arguing against the being of God and against His providence in making and governing the world, which being found by the verdict of an assize, you ought to be punished by death, and the confiscation of your moveables, to the example and terror of others.*

*Sic subcribitur*

*James Stewart*

## Cellmates

‘Yir a wee daftie no tae hae an advocate defending you.’ So says Black Archie, habitué of the Tolbooth prison, connoisseur of its many cells and currently companion of, and informal legal advisor to, Thomas Aikenhead. Black Archie’s arse has warmed more penitent’s stools than he can count on the fingers of his two hands – although, it must be said, he has fewer fingers than is usual, due to a youthful misunderstanding with a drunken fish-gutter in a Leith tavern.

‘The advocate I had did me no good,’ says Thomas. ‘He wrote two petitions at a shilling apiece, and damn all difference they made.’

‘Careful wi’ yir language, son,’ says Black Archie who has, in his time, been prosecuted for fornication, drunkenness, petty theft, breach of promise, lewd behaviour, embezzlement, necrophilia (another misunderstanding) and is now awaiting trial for bugging a mare in the stables of the Old Hart Inn, but has never, ever, been found guilty of profanity. Black Archie, it can truly be said, keeps a clean tongue in his head.

‘Sorry, Archie,’ says Thomas. ‘No offence intended.’

Black Archie taps one of his remaining fingers on one of his few remaining teeth. He is thinking. ‘Do ye ken who the judges are?’

‘Aye. Campbell of Aberuchil, Hume of Crossrig, Lauder of Fountainhall and Hope of Rankeillor.’

‘Lauder’s a decent enough body. He acquitted me of drunkenness last Midsummer.’

‘And my father knew Campbell’s grandfather.’

Black Archie brightens. 'He'll surely no' hang the bairn o' his grandsire's friend!'

'They weren't friends, as such. My father owed him money. A great deal of money.'

'Ah,' says Black Archie. He looks up at the ceiling, wagering with himself which waterdrop will fall first. After a time he says, 'It's no' too late tae inquire about an advocate.'

'I shall defend myself,' says Thomas. 'I'll make mincemeat of them.' He springs up and struts back and forth, fingers hooked in the lapels of his jacket, practising his courtroom swagger. His boots squelch on the wet floor of the cell.

'And you up agin Wily Jamie Stewart?' says Black Archie with a sad shake of his head. 'I wudnae stake money on yir chances.'

## **Trial**

Sir James Stewart, Lord Advocate of Scotland. Known as Trimming Jimmy to some, on account of his ability to turn with the tide, to step nimbly from a sinking ship to one in full sail. Whichever party is in the ascendant, Trimming Jimmy will be among their number. Others call him Wily Jamie, for he's rarely outwitted. Still and all, he's a Godly man. It's said the Sabbath is kept more strictly in the Stewart household than even Calvin himself could have dreamt of.

'Before we begin,' says Sir James Stewart, 'it has come to my attention that some here may be confused about the precise law under which we proceed.' He glances around the courtroom with a benevolent look on his face, as if forgiving the assembled crowd for their ignorance. The laws of the land combine into a fabulous and intricate mechanism, each component connected to another, the whole thing whirring and shuttling like a huge, invisible clockwork toy. Only a master craftsman can be expected to fully understand its workings.

'The 1661 law concerning blasphemy states that any found guilty of railing against or cursing God, or of denying the blessed Trinity – excepting those who are distracted in their wits – shall be put to death.' He pauses to let that sink in. 'Now,' he goes on, 'the 1695 act deals with those who deny God's very existence, or question the authority of the Bible. For those wrongdoers the punishment for a first offence is imprisonment, and penance in sackcloth and ashes. For a second offence, a fine is added to the aforementioned. If they prove obstinate in their blasphemy and offend a third time, then they will be punished with death.' Stewart takes a stroll across the courtroom, stroking his chin with one hand. He stops in front of the jury, squeezed together on two ungenerous

benches. The judges have the benefit of a small fire burning in a grate behind their backs, but the jury – and the public who have crowded the room in order to see the spectacle – must content themselves with body heat to fend off the December chill. ‘The second act does not supersede the first one,’ says Stewart. ‘You may like to think of it as being an addition, rather than a replacement.’ He turns and danders back to his usual place. ‘The defendant,’ he says, waving a dismissive hand in Thomas’s direction, ‘is charged under the first act. Is that absolutely clear?’

The gentlemen of the jury nod. The crowd chatter, the quick-witted explaining to the slow-witted exactly what Wily Jamie means. And Thomas Aikenhead, his pale face glistening with sweat, despite the cold, thinks perhaps he should, after all, have taken Black Archie’s advice about hiring an advocate.

‘Confirm your name.’

‘My name is Thomas Aikenhead.’

‘Age?’

‘Now there’s the thing. Eighteen? Nineteen? Twenty? One of those.’

Someone sniggers.

‘Don’t you know?’

‘Not precisely. My poor old ma and pa had shuffled off this mortal coil before I thought to ask them.’

More laughter.

‘Occupation?’

‘I am a student. Bound for medicine. Just like – almost like – my dear old papa.’

‘And are you mad?’

It’s Thomas’s turn to snigger. ‘No, not I.’

‘Not mad. Not distracted in your wits. I see.’

Thomas sees too. And understands better why they call Sir James Stewart *Wily Jamie*.

‘Do you know why you’re before this court, Thomas Aikenhead?’

‘Aye, I do. Because people have told lies about me. Especially my so-called friend Mungo Craig.’ There’s no laughter now, in the courtroom. A mutter travels from person to person. *Mungo Craig, you say? Was he the informer? Who knows? These days it could be any one of us...*

‘You are accused of blasphemy,’ Stewart says, ‘and this court shall try if those accusations have a firm foundation.’

‘And you think Mungo Craig is a reliable witness? When he’s making money out of this even as we speak?’

Stewart’s voice is flint-hard. ‘I hope you do not imply that Mungo Craig is in the pay of the court?’

Thomas sits back, calculating. Such a thought had not occurred to him before, but now that it’s been sparked in his mind... No. For once he thinks before he speaks. ‘Indeed not. I refer to this pamphlet –’ and here he pulls a crumpled paper from his jacket, smooths it flat, holds it up for Wily Jamie to see – ‘wherein Mungo Craig denounces me, and reviles me, and urges the court to vengeance. All for fourpence a copy. How can such a witness be judged impartial?’

Stewart regards Thomas gravely. 'Mungo Craig will give his testimony under oath. No man would lie under oath, for fear of the wrath of the Almighty.'

The first of the witnesses is called. Thomas Aikenhead sees a lad he scarcely knows stand up to give evidence against him. His face is familiar. They were in company together at times, no doubt of that, but does that make him fit to testify against Thomas? What could have been said that was so shocking?

'I, Mr Adam Mitchell, student in Edinburgh, aged twenty years, not married, purged of malice, prejudice and partial counsel, attest that I have heard Thomas Aikenhead say that our Blessed Saviour Jesus was no more than a magician, and his miracles mere tricks that only the foolish would believe. And that our Blessed Saviour Jesus deliberately chose as his followers ignorant men, who would believe his sleight of hand. And that Moses was a trickster too, but a better politician than our Blessed Saviour Jesus, in that he had the wit not to be executed.'

Did Thomas really say such things? He may have done. He thought them, certainly, and - for Thomas - the distance between thinking and saying is so narrow as to be barely there at all. Adam Mitchell sits down, and now comes the next witness. Another glimmer of recognition, a face from the coffee house...



‘I, John Neilson, clerk, in Edinburgh, aged near to twenty years, unmarried, purged of malice, prejudice and partial counsel, do solemnly swear that I have heard Thomas Aikenhead say that Jesus Christ learnt magic in Egypt, when he lived there as a child. He said Moses never existed, and that the Holy Scriptures are stuffed full of contradictions, and that Christianity will end before another hundred years have passed.’

Contradictions? Indeed, the book that all assembled here deem holy is bursting with fancies and nonsense that no wise man could credit. The worthy men of Scotland gathered here think themselves prudent, Protestant pragmatists, and yet they can read of water turned to wine, wives turned to salt, the dead to the living and never question the sense of it, never ask the questions they would ask of any book but this.

But now here comes Patrick. Surely Patrick will speak for him? His intellect is not great, but his heart is sound. And yet, Thomas notices that his friend does not look at him, and stares instead at the floorboards until the judges demand his testimony.

‘I, Patrick Middleton, student at the college of Edinburgh, aged twenty years, unmarried, purged and sworn, do attest that I have heard Thomas Aikenhead say that the Holy Scriptures are no more true than fables or romances, or the tales invented by poets. And that the book of Revelation is a book of alchemy, where the wise man will find a recipe for making the philosopher’s stone. And that Jesus Christ was no more than a magician. And that the blessed Trinity is a

contradiction, like a man-goat, or a circular triangle. And that he had the means to make himself immortal, and to transport himself to the moon.'

Oh Patrick, Patrick... what a strange stew your simple brain has concocted of things said, things half-said and things not said at all. Thomas's heart is juddering in his ribcage. His head feels full of air, and everything in the room around him looks brighter and clearer than it should.

'I, John Potter, student, aged eighteen years, unmarried, purged of malice, prejudice, partial counsel do solemnly swear...'

And poor John Potter says... nothing. The terror of the moment, with judges, jury and the shuffling crowd gawping at him makes his mouth dry, his throat close, his mind cloud. And while Wily Jamie does his wily best to wrinkle out some damning testimony, John Potter looks at Thomas Aikenhead – a lad he was not in company with above three times – and finds he has no evidence to offer.

At last comes Mungo Craig. Thomas's gut tightens, releases and tightens again, as if some inner torturer were turning the screw. Mungo lurches through the room, dwarfing the clerks and turnkeys. He looks to have passed a comb through his hair, although it is still as coarse and matted as a mule's tail. What can he add that is worse than what's already been said? Thomas stares at him, willing him to make eye contact. Mungo holds his head up, his jaw set with a firmness Thomas has never noticed before.

‘I, Mungo Craig, student, in Edinburgh, aged twenty-one years, unmarried, purged of malice, prejudice and partial counsel, and solemnly sworn, do attest that I heard Thomas Aikenhead deny the existence of God, and say that he cursed those who took him for baptism, declaring that it was a pretty trick to play on an innocent babe, to make promises on his behalf when he knew no better. And that by these means the ministers of religion captured the minds of the young with their snares and shackles. And that he hoped most fervently to see Christianity destroyed, and that were he banished for his freethinking he would take up the pen against religion, and make Christianity tremble.’

James Stewart stands alert. Everyone there – the judges, the jury, the crowd, the witnesses, everyone, in fact, except the accused – can sense the quiver of excitement inside him. It ripples through the room.

Mungo Craig sits a little apart from the other witnesses. Thomas is called to defend himself.

‘I can explain,’ he says. Hearing his own voice ring around the room fills him with new vigour. The pain in his gut eases. All will be well. ‘I may have said those things, but the words were not my own.’ He turns to the judges and jury. ‘Surely you educated men understand the concept of *quotation*?’ The educated men may well understand it, but they understand better that they’re being patronised.

‘I have read some books,’ Thomas continues, ‘that many might consider atheistical.’ He pauses to give the crowd time to make disapproving noises.

‘What I say is, if these books are so wicked, then why are they in the university

library, eh?' The lightning is crackling across his brain and the sparks are flying. 'And anyway,' he says, waving a casual hand at Mungo Craig, in emulation of Wily Jamie himself, 'this man here, who denounces me for what I said, read these books with me, on the same day, at the same library table!' He stares hard at Mungo. 'Say you didn't if you dare, my friend, but remember that you are still under oath. Beware the wrath of the Almighty!' He can't stop himself from smiling at the madness of it all. Him, preaching at Mungo. Him, of all people.

## Adjournment

'Listen to them,' says Thomas, back in his cell with Black Archie. Out beyond the prison walls they can hear the night-time sounds of Edinburgh. The Tolbooth prison squats like a giant mastiff in the middle of the High Street, so that the road must split into two narrow tracks on either side of it, hemmed in on all sides by tall buildings made of soot-blackened Scottish stone. Every noise echoes through the man-made canyon of the street until it reaches Thomas and Archie's cell window. Laced through the usual drunken skirmishes and shrill cries of women on the loose, there are other voices. *You showed them, Tam. To hell with the Kirk. Can a man no' think what he wills? Bonnie Thomas, marry me.*

'Do you hear them, Archie?'

'Aye, I do.' Archie's mood is low. Just today the turnkey told him that three men from Montrose are to be burnt for having carnal knowledge of a horse. According to the turnkey, the mother of one of the condemned men told how she had heard him weeping when he was an unformed child in her womb.

'The people are with me,' says Thomas. 'I cannae see the jury finding against me, eh? Not when they hear how I'm loved.' *To hell with Mungo Craig, the sleekit rat.* 'Amen to that,' says Thomas.

Och, Thomas, you're not to know that the mob gathered round the prison are doing you no favours, for the judges and the jury, the Kirk and the Privy Councillors, are to a man afraid of what's happening in the country. They are the survivors of the bad old days of the Killing Times when men fought and died over how their Kirk should be ordered, and now that they've won (or, in the case of Wily Jamie, lost and quickly changed allegiance) they are sore afraid

of losing the ground they've gained. They are, after all, a covenanted people. Day and night they wrestle with their sinfulness, and while they can quell the iniquities of their own corrupt human nature they see all around them the admonitory hand of the Almighty. Crops have failed, pestilence has thrived, fires have destroyed whole rows of tenements and strange, dead beasts of the sea have been washed up on the shores of Leith. And why is the Lord displeased? The one thing that has changed in this most devout of lands is a new infection, lately arrived from foreign parts, carried within the pages of certain books. Its names are legion. Some call it freethinking, others deism, still others atheism. Whatever the name, a remedy must be found. The diseased parts must be cut out, for the salvation of the whole.

Black Archie scents the penitential mood in the air, and knows that all the street protests in the world won't save Thomas. Worse than that, he suspects that his own luck may be about to run out too. He supposes he can't complain – he's lived longer than he dared hope, and got away with more in his time than young Thomas could dream of. There's not much in that thought to console him. He thinks instead of brighter possibilities: a tipsy judge; a thrawn jury; a King in London minded to show mercy. These notions cheer him. He decides maybe he and Thomas are not done for yet.

## Verdict

*The jury having unanimously found the accused, Thomas Aikenhead, guilty of railing against God the Father, and railing against God the Son, and denying the existence of God the Holy Ghost, thereby impugning all three persons of the Trinity, and denying that our Blessed Saviour Jesus Christ was the son of God, and scoffing at the Holy Scriptures – we, the Commissioners of Justice adjudge that the said Thomas Aikenhead be taken to the Gallowlee betwixt Leith and Edinburgh, upon Friday the eighth day of January next to come, betwixt two and four o'clock in the afternoon, and there to be hanged on a gibbet till he be dead, and his body to be interred at the foot of the said gallows, and ordains all his moveable goods and gear to be confiscated and inbrought to His Majesty's use, which is pronounced for doom.*

*Sic Subcibitur*

*C Campbell, D Hume, J Lauder, A Hope*

*Commissioners of Justice*

## Revelation

*I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Aye, and there was little time allowed between my beginning and my end. Eighteen years, or nineteen, or twenty. Enough to lose my way and find it again, and see that the path of truth would lead me to the Gallowlee.*

*There were secrets written on a scroll, and it was all bound up with seven seals, and no one in heaven or earth or Edinburgh was fit to break the seals. Except me.*

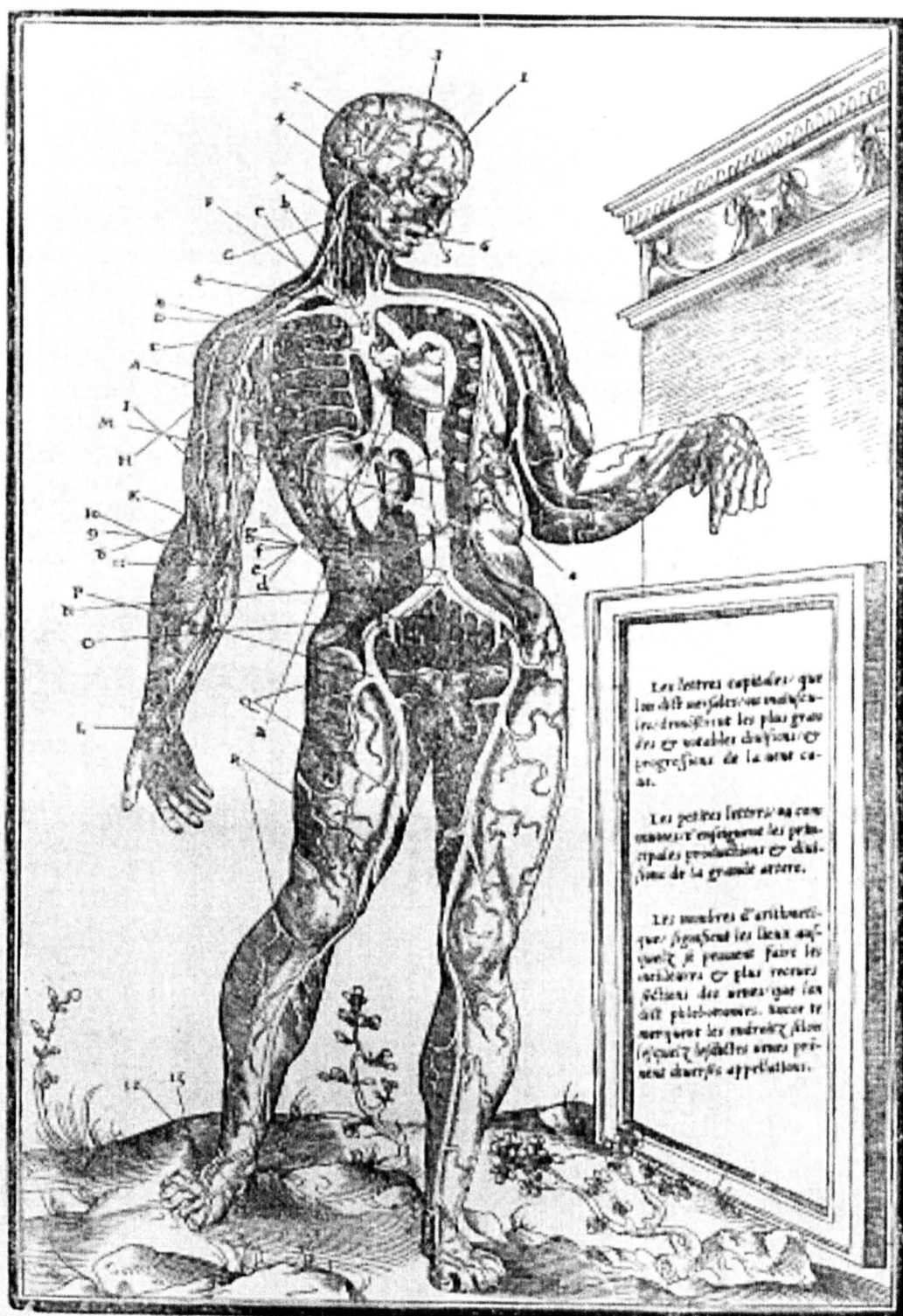
*But the country is ruled by a rod of iron. Like the vessel of a potter shall I be broken to pieces.*

*Behold, a door was opened in heaven. But not for me.*



### **PART III**

## **ANATOMY OF AN ACCUSATION**



I. 114.

*Edinburgh*, January 11. On *Thursday* last a Reprieve was moved for, in the Council for Mr *Thomas Aikenhead*, sentenced to Death for Atheism and Blasphemy, and the question being put, it was carried by one voice against him, and thereupon he was ordered to prepare for Death; and accordingly was on the 8<sup>th</sup> instant, carried from the Prison to the place appointed for his Execution.

***The Post Man, 16<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1697***

**1697**

## Mungo

It is after noon, but I am curled up on my bed, heels to the wall, knees hanging over the edge. Fully dressed. A great weight of blankets piled on top of me. I cannot get warm. My skin is prickled with goose pimples that will not subside.

A window in my mind cracks open and I see – just for a moment – Thomas, being led from his cell, out of the Tolbooth, along the Leith road as far as the Gallowlee. I echo each blink of his eye with my own. Am borne along by the steady drum of our heartbeats. Swallow, though there is nothing to swallow in the sour dryness of our mouths.

I throw the blankets off and struggle to my feet. Only movement will keep that fearful empathy at bay. One stride takes me to my window. I put my eye to the gap in the shutters. The street seems empty. I open one shutter and unlatch the window. This is something more than Sunday silence. The air crackles with it. *They mean to take him from the Tolbooth after noon.* Patrick's words. *You'd be wise to flit.* Hutchison's words. No. I'm going nowhere. I have done nothing wrong. Anyway, where would I go? My mother's house? I think not.

Will I know when it is finished? My mind is stretched tight as a drum-skin. I yearn for relief, as the hunted deer pants for sanctuary. Surely I will feel it in the depths of my soul? The Lord will stop the tongue of the unrighteous. The boil will be lanced. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Be near me, Lion of Judah. Strengthen and guide me. The path of righteousness is a dark one. I stumble, and lose my way.

Inspiration comes to me like a bright light illuminating my mind, and I know it must be from the Almighty. I will write the story down. This ordeal is God's

gift to me, to test me in the fire and find if I am made of gold or base metal. I must keep a record of it while it is fresh in my memory. Then, some years hence, I will take out my notes again and compose a memoir, or set of spiritual exercises, for the encouragement and comfort of others. The wisdom of hindsight will allow me to discern the hand of the Almighty in my current travails. I have pen, ink, paper and light enough to write by. Thomas's ending will see the beginning of my work. Such is the wondrous pattern of the Lord's plan.

***The Memoir of Mungo Craig, recounting the Strange and Troubling  
Occurrences leading to the Execution of Thomas Aikenhead for Apostasy,***

***8<sup>th</sup> January 1697***

*I first met with Thomas Aikenhead on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1696. The first day of the summer term. Easter was past and Christ our Saviour was risen. The Lion of Judah walked beside me on the road from my mother's house in Leith into town. You, reader, may wonder at this, so I must explain that I often imagine the Lord to be with me in the form of the Lion of Judah, and take great comfort and reassurance from his presence. I suspect I am unusual in this notion, for I have never heard anyone else describe it. But to return to my companion, the Lion of Judah. The rough stones did not trouble Him, for He was wise as a cat, strong as a horse, choosing where to set each footstep so that He came to no harm. He was with me when I left my bag at my lodgings. He was with me when I walked into the lecture hall. Because of Him I did not fear the buzz of clever words from the swarming wits of Edinburgh. They elbowed past me, talked around me*

*as if I were not there, but the Lion of Judah was with me, and I did not shrink from battle.*

*When the lecture was done we all pushed out of the hall, hungry for air. A sweat-sweet crush, elbows digging in ribs, boots treading on toes. My shoulders were a match for any of them. Dockman's shoulders, the only legacy passed on to me by my father. I muscled my way to the door and out into the street.*

*A cough behind me. A 'pardon me' cough. A quizzical cough. Wry cough. Dry cough.*

*I turned. There stood a slender lad, smiling, footering with his collar, looking as if he hadn't quite made up his mind about something. 'You,' he said to me, 'must be Mungo Craig.'*

*'Yes.' The heat flared in my face and spread up and down and around until I felt as if my very scalp must be blushing. I wanted to say who are you and how do you know me and why are you talking to me? But I didn't. I couldn't say a word.*

*'Have you any money?' he said.*

*'No.'*

*'Ah well,' he said. 'Shall we go to Dalton's?'*

*'But we've no means to pay.' My belly gurgled. I slipped my hand in my pocket and touched the slice of bread I'd palmed off my mother's table before I left Leith that morning.*

*His smile grew wider. 'But I, my dear fellow, have credit.' He ambled onward. I hung back. Was I included? Really? He must have realised I wasn't*

*following him, because he stopped and looked back. 'Come along then, man.*

*What are you waiting for?'*

*I was squeezed in a corner of Dalton's for the first time in my life, sipping my first coffee (bitter, black, thirst-making stuff, I concluded), watching him scan the room in the same way he had already skim-read the copies of the Edinburgh Courant and the Protestant Mercury that lay on the table. This much I now knew: he was acquainted with my fellow-lodger, Patrick Middleton; he had heard I was an uncommonly clever fellow; he liked that I was not spindly and wan, as most students are; he admired my name, thinking it had a certain air.*

*'Middleton tells me you can turn out a verse in next to no time.'*

*'It's a diversion,' I said. 'A reward after a day's studying. It'll hardly earn me my keep.'*

*'What are you meant for?' he said. 'Medicine or the Kirk?'*

*'The Kirk.'*

*He slapped the table, earning a frown from the gentlemen sitting around it.*

*'Well then, you can enliven your sermons with a bit of versifying.' He pulled over one of the newspapers and studied it. 'It says here that a goldsmith and a Laird are lately imprisoned in the castle for denouncing the King. Can you turn that to rhyme?'*

*I thought for a moment, rifling through the words in my mind, trying them out side by side, counting the beats, hearing the tune of them. 'For wise men know that treason hides itself, beneath the gaudy silks and trims of wealth. Disloyalty, a sin despised of old, can not be gilded o'er with gleaming gold.'*



*His smile came slowly, and he seemed to grow with it. 'By the Lord,' he said, and gathered some more frowns from our neighbours, 'that's splendid, Craig, splendid.' He reached forward, grasped my arm. 'Say you'll be my friend, Craig. Mungo. May I call you Mungo? Every man should have at least one friend who is a genius, and none of my sorry circle comes even close. So will you? Will you? I should like it very much if you would.'*

*'Yes,' I said. 'I will.'*

*What other answer could I give?*

The day has darkened. There is a candle by my bedside, but no kindling to light it. I stand and stretch as best I can in the narrow room. My feet are numb with the cold. Outside there are sounds of life in the street – two men arguing; a dog barking; the slow cllop of hoof beats from a solitary horse. I take the candle and go downstairs to the back kitchen. The dog is sleeping in her usual corner, the white of her coat tinted red by the faint glow of the fire. She opens one eye to look at me, then goes back to sleep. As I light the candle from the fire I hear the key turn in the front door of the shop and the scrape of wood against the stone floor. Hutchison keeps promising to mend the door. The winter damp has warped it worse than ever it was. The sound of it makes my flesh crawl.

Hutchison and Patrick come through to the kitchen. They carry with them the smell of smoke and liquor. The dog raises her head this time. Her stump of a tail wags, slapping against the flagstones.

'Well?' I say, not knowing how to phrase the questions I have.

‘Very well, I thank you,’ says Hutchison. He walks over to his chair, bumping against the table as he passes. ‘You might have tended the fire better,’ he says, settling himself down.

I look over to Patrick. He meets my gaze for a second, then bends to stir up the fire with the poker. ‘Shall I put more coal on?’ he asks.

‘It’s no’ worth it, at this hour,’ says Hutchison, twisting his accent so that he sounds like a common man.

Patrick pulls up a stool and sits close to the fire, his back to me.

‘It’s over then?’ I say. Neither of them speaks. ‘How... how did it go?’

‘They hanged him. That’s how it usually goes.’ Patrick’s voice has an uncustomary edge.

‘Did he say anything?’

Patrick turns and looks up at me. ‘What do you mean?’

‘He died like a true Christian,’ says Hutchison. ‘By which I mean he had a bible in his hand – whether by his own wish or not I cannot tell – and the praying of the clergy was so loud that no one could hear a word he said.’

‘He had a speech written and prepared,’ Patrick says. ‘He tried to read it, but he lost heart.’

‘And there was no trouble?’

Patrick shakes his head. ‘I kept thinking the reprieve must come, even today. And then, when it was done, I half expected to see a messenger gallop up bearing mercy from the King. That would have meant something, even when it was too late.’

‘What are they saying in the town?’

Hutchison stretches out his legs until his boots are near enough in the hearth.  
'Some say this will be the end of it. The Kirk has had its blood sacrifice. Others  
say it's only the beginning.'

## Isobel

Thomas Aikenhead is already two days dead by the time I return to Edinburgh. He had taken his walk to the gallows on the very morning my mother's mortal remains were carried to the kirkyard at Lauder. As soon as we are back in the city, and Robert and the children and servants settled at home, I declare I have need of a solitary walk while it is still daylight and leave the house. I follow the gradual downhill slope of the Leith road out as far as Gallowlee, for the judges had ordered that his body be left hanging in chains on the gibbet. It is a raw day, and the air is hard and clear as the finest glass. The cold makes the tears start in my eyes.

There are no more than a dozen of us there. It is likely the chill keeps the curious away, or perhaps the destruction of Thomas is old news. One common-looking fellow sits on a stool at the foot of the gibbet. The gallows-guard, no doubt. I avoid looking at the gibbet itself, but am conscious of it at the edge of my field of vision, nudging for my attention like a bad thought. As to the rest of the people gathered, there is only one other woman. She looks no more than five and twenty, and something in her narrow features reminds me of Thomas. There are two gentlemen of middling quality, and the others - including a gaggle of children - the lower type. They all watch me walk up the path to the hanging place. The older of the gentlemen raises his hat, his companion then taking the hint and doing likewise.

I make myself glance over at the gallows. Thomas's body has been placed in a man-shaped metal cage and hung from the gibbet, like an obscene birdcage. One of the mercies of a winter hanging is that there are no flies to use the dead man's flesh as a hatching feast for their young, but the cold doesn't keep the

cawbies away. They'll seek their food in any weather. A pair of them flap and squabble around the gibbet as I draw closer. One of the children lobs a stone towards them, striking Thomas on the chest so that the cage sways from side to side, like a pendulum. The birds retreat for a moment or two, then return, bolder than before. One clings on to the metal strut closest to Thomas's face. I force myself to look up.

In my first confusion I think the bitterness of the season has blackened and disfigured his face. It seems scarcely human - dark and distorted, like an ancient carving that has been dirtied and worn down by time. I look away, and catch the eye of the gallows-guard, still perched on his stool. His expression is as blank as a gambler at the card table. If my unease moves him in any way - to pity, or contempt - he does not show it. I make myself look at Thomas again. Trussed as he is in the cage, he could pass for one of the effigies the students burn when they are full of fervour and devilment at Christmas. His stockings are stained, and one shoe has come loose so that it hangs half on, half off. When I look at his hands I see that they too are black and unnatural in appearance.

'Why are his face and hands so strange-looking?' I ask the gallows-guard.

'We tarred them afore we put the corpse in the cage,' the man says. 'It saves him frae the weather. When we tarred his face we pulled the hood back down, to spare the distress o' the likes o' yourself. You wudnae want to gaze at him if the cawbies had dined on his eyes, eh?'

'When will you bury him? It seems unchristian to keep him from his grave.'

The man shrugs. I reach for my purse and fumble for a coin. My fingers are numb with the cold, in spite of my gloves. He watches me, but no spark of avarice flashes in his eyes. Nonetheless, when I offer him the money he takes it

readily enough. 'The order was tae leave him dangling a day or two more. Have you some interest in seeing him planted sooner?'

I glance over at the young woman. She is standing apart from the other spectators, a black cloak pulled tightly around her thin figure. 'His friends would rest easier if they knew he was past this indignity,' I say. 'There's money to smooth the way, if that's what is needed.'

He doesn't respond, and chews absently at his nails. I turn and begin walking away. 'Hold there,' he calls after me. I stop and look back, but make no move to return to him. When he stands up and comes towards me I know I have him snared. He doesn't speak again until he is close enough that he will not be overheard. 'My lad and I can do the job for you after sunset, for ten shillings.'

'I'll pay you five shillings now, and five when I know the job is done.'

'Ha! You may cheat me.'

'You can come calling at my door for the balance, and if I try to renege on our arrangement you can shame me in front of my neighbours.'

He thinks about that, eyeing me. I am chilled to the marrow, and I tense every sinew to stop myself shivering. 'For that I'd need to know where you bide, and what your name is,' he said.

'Come to the Pleasance, and ask for me at Dr Carruth's house. I am the doctor's wife. I am Isobel Carruth.'

I walk over to the young woman. 'Forgive me for intruding,' I say, 'but are you kin of Thomas's?'

She studies my face, as if she is appraising me. 'Aye. I'm his sister, Katharine. Did you know him?'

‘A little. He and his friends dined with us now and again. My husband is a doctor, you see, so Thomas...’

‘Your husband is Dr Carruth?’ she says sharply.

‘Yes.’ There is something in her tone that makes me afraid to inquire further. ‘If there is anything we can do to assist you, please come to us. We’re at the Pleasance.’

‘I hope I can manage very well without your help, or anyone else’s,’ she says, straightening up and thrusting her chin out. Just like her brother. Proud and obstinate, when provoked. She does not know, of course, that I am the unknown wellwisher who has shown them charity since their parents died. Thomas had sharper wits than her.

‘Will you walk with me back into town?’

She shakes her head. ‘I’ll bide here a while longer.’

So I walk home alone, past the scrubland that borders both sides of the Leith road. The soil is too ungenerous to put forth anything more fruitful than whin and rough grass. There are a few dwellings, but none of any substance. The hard ground is inimical to firm foundations. Although the landscape is as desolate as my spirits I am glad of its bleakness. In my oppressed state of mind I welcome the emptiness of the scene.

I was married five years before I provided my husband with a living child, and my reward was a dainty writing desk - the sort the Spaniards call a *bargueño*. Little Henry was scarcely a week old when Robert carried the desk into our bedchamber, with the assistance of a red-faced Agnes, so that I could see it before it was set into place in my parlour. ‘It is to be yours, and yours alone,’ he

said. At the time I thought him a madman, struggling up the stairs with a piece of furniture, when all that mattered to me in the world was the baby lying in the crib at my bedside. I was in the first delirium of mother-love, and all other things were trivial and absurd. Robert's face, aglow with delight at his choice of gift, looked almost grotesque. However, in the years that followed I realised how aptly he had picked. Other women of my acquaintance received jewels and new gowns - fripperies which they doubtless tired of quickly enough - whereas my desk became more precious to me as the demands of my household hemmed me in ever more tightly. It was my haven: a private place where I could write my letters and journal. Each time I sat down at my desk it was as if I had entered another world, where I existed as a creature of thought, not of flesh.

Returning now from the Gallowlee my dearest wish is to retreat to my desk, but first I am compelled to attend to the kitchen and my children. We brought my mother's servant Hetty back with us from Lauder, and I find her working listlessly at helping Agnes to prepare the evening meal. Her eyes are still red with weeping for her old mistress. I offer my help, which she declines, saying, 'I'm better keeping occupied, Mistress Isobel.' As I walk away from the kitchen along the passage I hear the steady tap-tap of her knife as she cuts through a parsnip at the kitchen table. Robert is out, calling on that small group of esteemed lady patients who are never content unless he can discover some malady in them. He had considered placing a notice in the *Protestant Mercury* to advertise that he was returned from his melancholy duties in Berwickshire, but I advised that there was no need. These particular patients of his are consummate spreaders of news. By noon tomorrow every lady in the city will know that he is once again available for consultation.



Upstairs in the nursery Henry and Margaret are sitting side by side on the window-seat with their Bible open across their laps. They are both reading silently, Margaret tracing her finger under the passage she is studying to keep her place. Their faces are parchment-pale in the fading winter light. Tomorrow I will insist they both go for a walk, to stir some colour into their cheeks. 'What story are you reading?' I ask.

'Joshua and the walls of Jericho,' says Margaret.

'Very good,' I murmur.

'I think it's ill-hearted,' Henry says without raising his eyes from the book. His frank, open face is darkened with a frown. The nurserymaid, Alison, who has been sitting quietly by the fire darning a stocking, looks up and stiffens. She is the daughter of Covenanters of the most extreme variety, although apparently moderate enough in her own views.

I sit down on the window-seat beside the children. 'Why do you not like it, darling?'

'Why did Joshua have to kill everyone in Jericho?'

Margaret sighs. 'Because they were heathens, you gaupie.'

This does not satisfy Henry. 'But it was wicked of him to kill the women and children and animals too.'

'Well,' I say slowly, aware of Alison's eyes on me, 'Joshua was only doing what God told him to do, and perhaps God had some very good reason to want them all killed.'

'Even the animals?'

'God's ways are not our ways, Master Henry,' Alison says, her darning forgotten in her hands. 'We should not question the ways of the Lord.'

Henry looks up at me for confirmation of Alison's words. My mouth feels dry. Should I clip the wings of his fledgling curiosity, or leave it free to thrive and fly? I touch his hair - deep brown, like Robert's - and think of Thomas. How would he have answered Henry? His mind fizzed with intelligence and questions, and it had brought him to the gallows. 'Alison is correct, Henry,' I say, the words like ashes in my mouth. 'We must not question God.'

Henry's eyes fill with tears, and he rubs at them desperately.

'Henry is a crybaby,' Margaret says, her mouth turned in a sly smile. 'He cries more than me, and I am a girl.'

'Perhaps he has a warmer heart than you,' I reply sharply. I recall Margaret's dry-eyed reception of the news that her grandmother was dead.

She shifts away from us both along the window-seat, and her movement nearly causes the Bible to tumble down onto the floor, but Henry catches it. I wish I could like my daughter better.

Henry closes the Bible and twists round to look out the window. 'Will Thomas visit us, now that we are come back?'

'Not for a while,' I say weakly. 'I believe he has gone away.'

Henry looks up at me, frowning. 'Where has he gone?'

'I'm not sure.' I cannot bear to tell him. The idea of breaking his heart with yet another death is too much to endure.

Alison follows me out of the nursery. 'Pardon me, mistress,' she says, with an expression on her face that is a mixture of determination and boldness. 'Do you not think it is your duty to lay before the children what befell that young man? His death was intended to put a stop to this raging spirit of atheism that

has the country in uproar. His blood will go to waste if word of it is not spread among the young.' Her eyes sparkle with passion.

'I will tell them in my own time, Alison.'

'I'd urge you not to mourn that Thomas Aikenhead. He was lost, you ken? Lost to the ways of the Lord.'

'We are all sinners, Alison. Let he who is without sin...' I don't finish my quotation. Her breed of Christian has little appetite for mercy.

She reaches into her apron pocket and pulls out a pamphlet. 'You won't have seen this. It was circulated after you and the master had gone off to your homeplace to tend your poor mother. Read it, mistress. You'll find a full account of his wickedness there.'

I carry the pamphlet to the landing window, the better to study it. *A Satyr against Atheistical Deism*. Below is a subtitle: *An account of Mr AIKENHEAD's NOTIONS Who is now in Prison for the same Damnable APOSTACY*. And below that, the name of the author. Mungo Craig. 'But Mungo was his friend!' I say in shock.

Alison blinks at me. 'Aye, from the pen of his closest companion. It's all there, mistress. Of course, he doesn't repeat the blasphemies themselves. They were too dreadful to place in print.' She shudders, but her mouth twitches into a smile, as if her horror gives her pleasure.

I struggle to understand what I am seeing. I knew Mungo had testified against Thomas – many in his circle of friends had done so – but to publish a pamphlet defaming him was something quite different. 'When did this pamphlet appear?' I say.

Alison frowns as she tries to remember. 'You and Dr Carruth went to the country at the start of December, and this was all around the town before Christmas.'

So Mungo wrote and published this before Thomas's trial. That had begun on the 23rd of December. Sentence was passed on Christmas Eve, and then the fine, godly men who condemned him retired to their homes to toast the season with their families. 'May I keep this, Alison?' I say.

'By all means, mistress. Keep it, and read it, and thank God you were not infected with his poisonous notions.'

I leave the nursery and walked downstairs to my parlour. When I first heard that Mungo had given evidence against Thomas I supposed he was coerced. All it would have taken was a hint that if he did not cooperate with the Privy Council then they might next direct their attentions to his soul. This pamphlet was evidence of something much worse, but I would not know its full extent until I read it. Anger and melancholy crush on my heart like weights. These past days I have met death and deceit at every turn. My mother's swift decline drained the very life from me. Thomas is dead, and Mungo is his betrayer. And how or when am I to tell the children about Thomas? Margaret will likely regard the episode with heartless curiosity, but as for Henry... he adored Thomas, and longed for his visits. However, I must at all costs protect Henry from the dangers of freethinking. A sudden thought chills me. What if it is too late? Thomas himself once told me that he had been no more than ten years of age when the first doubts crept into his head. Perhaps, had his parents still been living at that time, they would have counselled him into conformity. I determine

to watch Henry carefully, and take every opportunity to guide him to safety. Someday, when he is older, he can think what he pleases. I hope he will have the wisdom to keep those thoughts to himself. As I do.

At last I am at my desk. I light the lamp and sit for a moment with one hand over my eyes, as if that might shield me from my thoughts. All through these last weeks of Thomas's arrest and trial I never believed it could have come to this. I have lost count of the letters I wrote on his behalf. They were reasoned, lucid... How could they have had so little effect?

Perhaps if I had not been compelled to remove from Edinburgh due to my mother's final illness I might have achieved more. The notion torments me. That I was not here in town during Thomas's last days increases the sense of dislocation. The sensation puts me in mind of when our infant daughter - my last-born - died after one day of life. I was too ill to see her in her winding sheet, to bid her farewell, and somehow that made it seem as if she was not really dead. Even to this day I have a fancy that she is somewhere in the house - being rocked in her cradle by Alison, perhaps - eternally locked in babyhood, always a newborn child. But the cradle stands motionless in a dark corner of the nursery, its only occupant an old dolly of Margaret's. I was able to kiss our other little lost ones goodbye, and I think that is why they do not haunt my thoughts.

The last time I saw Thomas was in his cell at the Tolbooth before the trial, his eyes bright with defiance. Neither of us had any notion that his life might be in peril. I cannot tally that boy with the tarred mannequin I saw dangling in its cage at the Gallowlee, and yet it was him. Him and not him. I try to blink away

the memory, but it lingers in my mind. And then come the other images from these last days. My mother's face in the moments after her death – how was it that it could change so suddenly, and yet so subtly? The intense, sacred silence of the death-chamber. My shameful relief when Hetty and the local wise woman ushered me out of the room so that they might wash the body.

I turn to Mungo's pamphlet. The printer, I see, is Robert Hutchison of College Wynd. The name is familiar. Plook-faced Hutchison. That was one of Mungo's nicknames for him. Plooky Rab. He takes in students as lodgers, Mungo among them. Did they hatch this pamphlet between them? Hutchison is a parsimonious landlord if Mungo's tales are true. Perhaps he saw in Mungo's connection to Thomas an opportunity for profit. I can happily condemn Hutchison's character, knowing next to nothing about him, but I cannot conceive that Mungo would have been so moved by money-lust. It did not sit well with the young man I am acquainted with. Then again, how deeply do I know him? I observed him to be quiet and noted his diffidence when either Robert or I endeavoured to speak to him. Further than that I do not know.

I flick the pamphlet open. The first page lists the inventions Thomas promised to bring to the world - all nonsensical fancies, of course. *A sovereign antidote against all external and internal causes of death; a new engine whereby we may have easy commerce with the moon; an infallible and cheap way of making the Philosopher's Stone, in four hours, and for 4 Scots pounds.* I can imagine Thomas, face flushed with delight at being the centre of attention, making such claims to entertain his companions. Had Mungo not understood that they were merely jokes? What was the purpose of listing them here? It

occurs to me that perhaps Mungo's true purpose had been to help Thomas - to convince his readers that here was a frothy and crackbrained lad who posed no threat to the good order of the state. However, Mungo's final description of Thomas's views on Christianity chills my benevolence: *A complete aggregate of all the blasphemies that ever were vented by the atheistical Ministers of Satan in all ages*. How could he say such a thing, with Thomas about to face trial? He concludes the first page with the promise that Robert Hutchison can produce witnesses to support his claims.

The next number of pages contain a lengthy poetic diatribe against the irreligious: couplet after couplet of blood and thunder. I skim through it. He vents his rage against the *proud ungodly scum*, the *sluttish minds* of the freethinkers. There is an energy to his work, no doubt of that, and now and again he seems to capture something of Thomas's essence: *Such are the blazing comets that attract th'amazement of the novel-catching pack*. Yes, that was Thomas. A bright star in our dark lives, and Mungo was drawn to his light as irresistibly as any of us. There is nothing here that might damn Thomas directly. I begin to think that Mungo and Plooky Rab played a sleekit hand, using Thomas's name and notoriety to gull their customers into buying a pamphlet filled with nothing more than wasted ink and effort. But as I read on the tone becomes more pointed. *Will Scotland nourish such Apostacy? A covenanted people!* These are words chosen to inflame the Godly men of the Privy Council. *Atone with blood th'affronts of heav'n's offended throne*, Mungo urges. *Atone with blood*.

Robert is in an unfathomable mood at the dinner table. He begins to recount some tittle-tattle he's acquired from one of his lady patients, then halts abruptly and assumes a mourning face. After a few kind-toned but offhand platitudes he falls into deep thought. I want to tell him about Mungo's pamphlet, but dare not raise the matter while the children are here, as it will certainly lead them to ask questions about Thomas.

I wonder how best to open the subject. Robert was his usual reticent self on the subject of Thomas's trial and execution and had not approved of my attempts at intercession. I wonder how he will respond to the news of Mungo's perfidy. Robert always seemed more comfortable with Mungo than with Thomas – perhaps there was something in Mungo's humble background that chimed with him.

After the meal is done, the lamps lit and the children gone upstairs, I bring out the pamphlet for him to study.

'So this is Mungo's infamous publication,' he says.

'You know about it?'

'It was mentioned at a number of my visits. The good ladies of the Burgh have rather taken against our young friend Mungo.'

'Do they mean to make Thomas the hero of a romance now that their husbands have killed him?'

Robert looks up sharply. 'Bitter words, Isobel.'

I say nothing, but look down at my hands while he scans the pamphlet. I count the pages as he turns them.

'You see how he's dressed up his qualifications?' Robert indicates the list of letters Mungo has placed after his name. 'Has he even received his degree yet?'



Trust Robert to quibble over such niceties. 'Perhaps he thought it gave him more *gravitas*.'

'Along with some lines from Juvenal.' He points to the Latin quotation on the front of the pamphlet. 'Shall I translate?'

'My brain is not so rusted that I cannot attempt it.' In spite of the dreary circumstances, I cannot resist the challenge, and take the pamphlet back from him. "Semper ego auditor tantum?" That is straightforward enough. "Must I always be the listener?" Robert nods in approval, and I continue.

"Numquamque reponam vexatus toties..." These are the opening lines of Juvenal's first satire. I had known them by heart as a girl. "Am I never to get a word in..?"

Robert peers at the words and agrees. He taps his forefinger against his lips. 'Young Mungo seems determined to show his learning.'

'Typical of his type.' I repent the words as soon as I say them, more so when I detect the flicker of disapproval on Robert's face.

'What do you mean by that?'

I feel my face colouring. 'Wasn't his father of a very lowly station? I'm sure I heard that Mungo was a charity scholar.'

'Some of our most promising young men have been educated by the charity of the town.'

I bow my head again, accepting his reprimand. 'That was ungracious of me. He cannot help his origins.'

Agnes's approaching footsteps halt our conversation. She taps on the door, and Robert calls for her to enter. The door opens a little, and her face appears

around it. She seems more rosy-cheeked than usual. 'There's someone at the back door for you, mistress.'

Robert frowns. 'Who would call at this hour? And to the back door?'

I am equally perplexed for a moment, until I remember. The gallows-guard. He had quite slipped my mind. I turn to Robert. 'Ah, I recall now,' I lie, 'I promised charity to a poor family - they have some connection to an old labourer of my father's.' I rise and hasten first up to my parlour to fetch some money, then back down to the kitchen, followed by Agnes. I do not quite know why I lied to Robert.

Agnes had closed the door against the gallows-guard, and left him standing in the yard. 'I didn't like to let him in, mistress, and leave Hetty alone with him,' she whispers, unbarring the door and opening it. Hetty herself is seated by the fire, staring into it as if she has no interest in these goings on. Apart from the fire the only light in the room comes from a small lamp on the kitchen table.

I motion for the man to come in. He steps forward cautiously, peering into the dark corners of the kitchen as if he suspects an ambush.

'I did as you asked,' he says. 'He's down and buried at the gallows' foot.'

'How can I be sure of you?'

'Aye, I kenned you'd want proof. When me and my boy cut him down, we had a root through his pockets.'

'And what did you find there?'

'A coin for me, as is customary. You maybe don't know it, Missus, but should you ever come tae the gallows you must mind tae tip the executioner, and leave money in your pocket for those who are obliged tae gather you up afterwards.' It is clear that he takes a certain enjoyment in informing me of

these niceties. There are certain men – and not only among the lower orders – who thrill at distressing women with unpleasant truths. I am determined not to betray any sign of disturbance.

‘I take it you must have found some other thing?’

He nods. ‘Aye. There was a letter.’

‘To whom was it addressed?’

‘I couldnae tell you.’ He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a sheaf of folded papers that are sealed with a coarse lump of wax.

I take the bundle from him and study the front of it. ‘*Turn thee unto me, and have mercy upon me; for I am desolate and afflicted,*’ I read out loud. ‘I wonder who it was meant for?’

‘You’d know that better than me, eh Missus?’

I slip the papers into the folds of my sleeve and say, ‘I must pay you what you’re owed.’ I begin to count the five shillings out into his hand.

‘Tae tell you the truth, Missus, I was sorry tae see him hanged. If we strung up every young lad who had daft notions in his head there wudnae be twa many of them left, eh?’

I hear a movement behind me, and turn to see Robert in the kitchen doorway. Something in his stance makes me nervous. I can sense his eyes on me, even though his face is in shadow. Agnes too stands looking on, like judgement personified. My hand shakes as I place the last shilling in the gallows-guard’s outstretched palm. The skin of his hand has a yellowish tinge in the lamplight, and the coins look like five dark tar-drops against it.

He pockets his fee, glances over my shoulder at Robert, hesitates for a moment and then nods his thanks and retreats back out the door into the unlit backyard.

I take a deep breath to compose myself. 'You may bar the door, Agnes,' I say. 'We'll hardly have more callers tonight.'

Robert waits for me in the hallway. 'He didn't sound like a countryman,' he says.

'I don't understand you.' I brush past him and walk towards the dining room. 'Shall we go back to our translation?'

'What was his connection with your family? Exactly?' He follows me as he speaks, like a dog on the scent of its prey.

'Och for goodness sake. My father knew half the poor folk of Lanarkshire, and many a one had kin in Edinburgh. Do you expect me to keep a ledger of all his patronage?' I stop at the dining room door. 'Will we continue with our study of Mungo's pamphlet?'

Robert holds back. 'You are capable of interpreting it by yourself. It seems you prefer to conduct your affairs without my assistance.' He turns and goes back down the hallway and into his consulting room.

I consider pursuing him, doing what a good wife should and calming the troubled waters of his temper. But I have Thomas's papers, and I am determined to read them tonight. I ask Agnes to light me a candle, and thus equipped I go upstairs to my parlour and opened the bundle. The outer sheet was a letter, addressed to no one in particular.

*Tolbooth Prison, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1697*

*Being now wearing near the last moment of my time of living in this vain world, I have by the enclosed under my own hand, now, when I am stepping into eternity, given a true relation of the original rise, matter and manner of my doubtings, for which I am to die. I carry this in the hope that it will be delivered to my dear and worthy friends, in order that they may convey it to the world in general. I hope I shall be forgiven, by the mercy of God, and that these papers will give satisfaction to you in particular, and after I am gone produce more charity that hath been my fortune to be trusted hitherto with, and remove the apprehensions, which I hear are various and many about my case, being the last words of a dying person, and proceeding from the sincerity of my heart.*

*Sic subscribitur*

*Thomas Aikenhead*

I can hear his voice in the words of his letter. What bravery, to compose such fine phrases in the very anteroom of death. What thoughtfulness – and common sense – not to name the intended recipient. I suppose it was meant for Katharine, for I can think of no one else whom Thomas might have deemed a friend. I will have to find out where she stays, and pass these pages on to her, although I quail at the prospect of meeting with her again. It was clear from her manner today that she is not well disposed towards our household.

I glance at the rest of the papers. The writing is so cramped that it is near impossible to read by candlelight, particularly as my eyes are half-blinded with tears, but I force myself on. It seems to be a treatise – or a speech perhaps – explaining the spiritual road he had travelled. Certain phrases leap out at me: *It*

*is a principle natural to every man to have an insatiable inclination to truth, and to seek for it as for hidden treasure; the more I thought thereon, the further I was from finding the verity I desired; I cannot have such certainty either in natural or supernatural things as I would have.* The words chime true inside my own soul. These past weeks, watching my mother's agonies and finding myself utterly uncomforted by both private prayer and the words of clergymen, I too have been seeking for truth. The Bible promises that those who ask will not be turned away hungry, but I have been. Doubt gnaws at me like the pangs of starvation.

I scan forward to the final paragraphs, my eye caught by Mungo's name. Thomas writes: *I must vindicate my innocence of those abominable aspersions made in a printed satire of Mr Mungo Craig, whom I leave to reckon with God and his own conscience if he was not as deeply concerned in those hellish notions for which I am sentenced as ever I was.* Is Mungo an atheist too? I recall Thomas once joking about Mungo's freethinking tendencies. It cannot have been true. Mungo has ambitions to become a Kirk minister. But if it is not true, why would Thomas have written it? Was it a malicious dart thrown from the grave, revenge for Mungo's pamphlet? I can understand such an impulse, but would Thomas have wanted his last words to be a lie?

## Mungo

Classes resume today at the university. I prepare my pens, ink and copybook and pack them into my bag. When I go downstairs I find the kitchen empty. There's a bustle of commerce sounding in the shop – Hutchison's voice, and a customer responding. On the table in front of me sits a heel of bread and two plates smeared with butter and crumbs. I go back to the foot of the stairs and call up to Patrick, but get no reply. He must have gone on ahead without me.

I go out through the back door and into the wynd, then up the steep way to the university. It is scarcely daylight. This is the first day I've stepped across the threshold in over a week, and the cold air makes my head ache. I feel as if every eye is upon me, but I know that cannot be so. Few would recognise me outside my own small circle. Fewer still would know me by name.

There's an odd atmosphere about the town. I find it hard to determine what it reminds me of. Like the morning after a storm, perhaps. Yes, I remember a great tempest when I was a child in Leith, and how we all – men, women and children – were drawn out to the shore the next day to see what harm had been done to the boats. But the mood today is something different from that. There's a sense of aftermath, yes, but more than that too. Is it shame?

As I get closer to the university my chest tightens. I pray silently, calling upon the Lion of Judah to walk by my side. The Faculty of Divinity is housed in a ramshackle building that was once a merchant's house, until he died and bequeathed it to the college. Some say he did it as much to spite his family as to glorify God. The courtyard in front of it is crowded with students and here I cannot pretend that I am not being remarked upon. I see nudges, pointing

fingers, heads leaning together to share whispered words. *Lion of Judah, Lion of Judah...*

I reach the sanctuary of the Faculty. The hallway is blessedly empty, although I can hear a murmur of conversation from the common room. My fellow scholars will be gathered around the fire, warming themselves before facing the chill of the lecture hall. I hesitate at the door for a moment, and before I can lay my fingers on the handle it is pulled open and John Row, the regent, barges into me. We both leap back, I uttering an apology, although our collision was not my fault. He glares at me.

‘Listening at keyholes, Mr Craig?’ he says.

‘No!’ I exclaim. I can see the other students standing in the room, staring out at me. ‘I was just about to come in.’

Row says nothing in reply, but goes past me and up the stairs to prepare for the morning’s lecture. I walk into the common room. The others neither obstruct me nor shrink away from me, but as if on a signal they begin to leave the room, one after the other, until I am left standing alone before the fire.

*My friendship with Thomas grew quickly. (Note to self - the reader may wonder at this. I must needs give some explanation, with – perhaps – some commendable awareness of how I allowed my vanity to be flattered.) Never before in my life had I been so admired. Thomas was not the first to notice my gifts, but he was the first to praise me for them. My poor parents were always rather afraid of my aptness for learning. When I got my place at Heriot’s the masters pushed me hard, as if they thought I would slacken my efforts without their coercion. Their faces were stern as granite. I could never tell if I had*



*pleased or disappointed them. But Thomas... he lauded my dexterity with words, my knowledge of Greek and Latin, my knack of making a rhyme. 'You'll be wasted in the Kirk, Mungo,' he used to say. 'You'll have to write your satires on the sly and send them to London to be published.'*

*His words puffed me up, no doubt about it, but there was wormwood mixed with the honey of his adulation. My friendship with him had drawn me closer into his circle, and it soon became clear to me that Thomas was the only one of them who thought so well of me. For Thomas was the blazing star at the centre of our constellation. He was the flame, and we fluttered round him like so many moths.*

*The first time I met Dr Carruth and his wife was in the summer of 1696. I remember the day, for it was the same day Hutchison's she-dog gave birth to her pups.*

*Yes, I remember Hutchison had a fire blazing in the back room despite the season, and the sweat was blinding me though I was in my shirtsleeves. 'Can we not open the window?' I said.*

*'And have her catch cold?' He looked down at his white dog. She was worrying at a dirty ould blanket, snuffling it into the nook beside the hearth and then turning around and around on it as if she'd taken the head-staggers.*

*'Are the pups coming, do you think?'*

*'Aye. Any minute now. If your man Thomas hurries up he'll see it.' He touched the sore on his cheek. 'You told him to make me up a poultice?'*

*'I asked him. Thomas won't be told anything.' The dog was half-crouched now, still circling and making wee whimpering noises. 'Should I call Patrick down? He might want to watch this.'*

*Hutchison didn't reply to me, but raised his head and guldered, 'Mr Middleton! Come on down here and you will see something to your advantage!'*

*A clatter on the stairs and Patrick stumbled in to the room, pulling on his coat. 'What is it?' He looked all round as if he expected to see someone of importance.*

*'This lassie's about to pup.' Hutchison nodded over at the dog. She was rubbing her rump on the blanket, and I could just see a dark clot of something starting to nose out of her nethers.*

*Patrick stood gawping at the dog for a moment, then took his coat off again and set it on the dresser. The dog's sides were heaving like a bellows and the dark clot was pushed further out. I could see now that it was a tiny snout.*

*'Who's the sire?' Patrick asked.*

*Hutchison shrugged. 'I'll know better when I see the colour of them. Is this first one black, do you think?'*

*We all hunkered down closer to her and watched as the pup slithered free and lay like a stunned fish on the bloody blanket. She licked the pup so hungrily I thought she was going to eat it, but her rough tongue stirred it into life and nudged it towards her teats.*

*'He's black as soot,' said Patrick.*

*There was a rap at the door of the shop. Thomas. I went to let him in, glad to get away from the heat of the fire.*

*'Look at the state of you,' he said, glancing head to toe at me. 'You're like a hog roasting on a spit.'*

*'Hutchison has the place well heated for the dog's lying in,' I whispered.*

*I was rewarded with a grin. 'He'd make a fine man-midwife.'*

*'Did you bring his poultice?'*

*Thomas patted his coat pocket. 'He'll have a face as clear as an angel's in no time. Has he money to pay me?' (Note to self – I may wish to explain to the reader at an earlier point in my memoir that Thomas had some skill in the apothecarial arts.)*

*I advised him to get payment in advance from Hutchison, and we went through to the back room. Another pup had been born. This one was brindled.*

*'It has the same coat as that mastiff the tapster at the Hart keeps,' Patrick said.*

*'If that beast was the sire these pups would have burst her apart.' Hutchison peered closer. 'Anyway, the tapster keeps the mastiff chained up in the cellar. It would tear the throat out of his customers if he let it roam free.'*

*'A sly dog will slip its leash,' I said, 'if the lure is strong enough.' A third pup slipped out. White, like its mother.*

*Hutchison stood up, his knees creaking louder than the snap of the fire in the hearth. He looked expectantly towards Thomas. 'Well?' he said.*

*Thomas looked blank, and for a moment I thought he was going to torture Hutchison. I hoped he wouldn't, for it would be Patrick and I who'd have to bear his bad mood afterwards. I was relieved when Thomas pulled the little parcel from his pocket. 'That'll be sixpence,' he said.*

*'I don't think I have change,' said Hutchison.*

*Thomas put the parcel back in his pocket. 'Let me know when you do,' he said, and turned as if to walk out.*

*'Hold on, hold on,' Hutchison grumbled, reaching into his waistcoat. 'Here, I have sixpence after all.'*

*Thomas bowed and pocketed the coin. He retrieved the little parcel. 'It needs heating,' he said, starting to take off the wrappings.*

*The poultice was tied in a muslin bag, and Thomas set it down on the griddle Hutchison kept by the fireplace. He hooked the griddle onto the crane and swung it over the flames. An acrid smell hit the back of my throat and I started to cough. So too did Hutchison and Patrick. Only Thomas was immune. He bent over the fire watching the poultice. His hair hung down so that I couldn't see the expression on his face, but I imagined his intent look. He had that gift of concentration. 'Here's another pup,' said Patrick, but I couldn't take my eyes away from Thomas.*

*'Is that thing not ready yet?' There was a catch in Hutchison's breath as he spoke. 'It near has me choked.'*

*'Patience,' Thomas said. A moment more and he swung the griddle off the fire and picked the poultice up delicately, holding a loose end of the muslin between his index finger and thumb. He glanced at Hutchison. 'I'd advise you to sit, sir, before I apply this.'*

*Hutchison pulled the good chair away from the table and planted himself in it. 'Will it hurt?'*

*'Aye, at first.' Thomas advanced on him and pressed the poultice firmly against the sore on Hutchison's cheek. He flinched, and gripped the seat of the chair.*

*'I think she's all done,' Patrick said. He was the only one of us still paying attention to the dog. 'Four pups. Two black, one white, one brindled.'*

*'One less than last time,' Hutchison said, without looking down at her.*

*Thomas stood for a moment, holding the poultice in place. 'This needs to stay against the skin until it has cooled. Will you take it? I have an engagement in the Pleasance.' He glanced at me. 'Don't look so put out, Mungo. You're invited too. And Patrick.'*

*Hutchison took over from Thomas in holding the poultice. 'Will this one treatment be sufficient?'*

*'It may be, or it may not. The sore should dry out, and then come away in a week or so. If it doesn't we'll try again.' He knelt down by the dog and her pups. 'Look how they feed. I feel starved just watching them.' The dog eyed him. She seemed docile enough in her post-natal stupor, but I was afraid that she'd snap if he put a hand near the pups. I thought of warning him, but something made me hold my tongue.*

*'Who is it you know in the Pleasance?' Patrick said. Thomas just smiled and rubbed the dog's head. She closed her eyes. The only sound was the crackle of the fire and the rasp of Thomas's fingers as he rubbed them up and down the ridge of the dog's nose.*

*'Do you want a pup then, Thomas?' Hutchison said.*

*'That brindled one would make a fine companion, but my sister would go through me if I came home with a dog.' He stood up. 'Come along then, you two. It's time we were away.'*

*'Am I properly turned out?' I picked fluff from my coat as we walked, and wished my clothes were not so shabby. The Pleasance was a respectable address.*

*'You'll do.' Thomas's garments were in all likelihood older than mine, and were certainly more worn, but they had about them an air of faded quality and he carried them well.*

*'Are you not going to tell us what this is about?' Patrick scurried along, trying to keep up with us.*

*'I'm going to collect a debt.'*

*That was his way. Never a straight answer. I was learning not to rise to it. Patrick hadn't attained that wisdom yet, but he was too out of breath to ask more. Thomas must have realised we weren't going to press him. That irked him. I could see it in the way the smirk faded from his face.*

*We got to the Pleasance. The houses were tall and thin, but the street was broad and airy, with the crags and green places of Arthur's Seat beyond. We came to one house at the end of a terrace with a fine set of steps leading up to the front door. Thomas looked up at it a moment. 'It's smaller than I remembered it,' he murmured, then bounded up and rattled the doorknocker. A raw-faced countrywoman in servant's dress opened the door. 'Mr Thomas Aikenhead, to see Dr Carruth,' he said loftily.*

*'Dr Carruth is at table,' the servant said, taking in Patrick and I with a dubious glance.*

*'He and my father were... acquainted,' Thomas said. 'Please be so good as to tell him I am here.'*

*The woman gave a curt nod, but closed the door in our faces nonetheless.*

*'What do we do now?' I looked up and down the street. One gentleman was walking past on the other side. He stared at us. I felt my face heat.*

*'She'll be back, you wait and see.' Thomas walked to the corner where a wynd ran down the side of the house. 'As I recall his consulting room was towards the back of the house. I'm away to have a keek through the window.'*

*Patrick and I exchanged a glance. He looked as fearful as I felt. 'Have a bit of wit, Thomas,' I called after him as he skited down the wynd. 'They'll have the town watch on us if they catch you snooping.'*

*Thomas ignored me and stood on tiptoe looking in through the window. 'He has a wall-full of books,' he said. 'How would you like to have so many volumes, Mungo?'*

*The front door opened again just as Thomas scrambled back up the wynd. The servant woman nodded us in.*

*We were shown upstairs and into a parlour grander than any I'd been in before. Dr Carruth stood before us. The dining room was downstairs – we had passed it on our way through the hall. The chink of spoons on platters and the voices of a woman and children drifted up through the narrow house. Dr Carruth was a man of around forty years of age, slender-built and quietly dressed. The only remarkable feature of his appearance was his eyes. They were dark and restless, and I felt my stomach tighten with anxiety. I could not imagine feeling at ease in his company. He focused his unsettling gaze on Thomas. 'You were only a wee lad when I saw you last,' he said. 'Your father, is he...?'*

*'Dead,' Thomas said cheerfully. 'Mother too. I have been an orphaned bairn since the age of ten.'*

*Dr Carruth looked as if he did not know what to make of Thomas's flippancy. 'I am sorry to hear that.'*

*'Poor father,' Thomas said, throwing himself into an armchair. 'I gather he didn't have much sense. I remember little of him.'*

*'He seemed very fond of you.' Dr Carruth said. The expression on his face suggested an inner turmoil. He was irritated at Thomas's presumption in sitting without being invited to do so, but he was nervous too. 'What brings you to call on me, after all this time?' he said at last.*

*'I am a student at the University.'*

*'I had supposed as much.'*

*'It is my hope to be a physician. A step up from dear old father.'*

*Dr Carruth nodded. 'That is most commendable. You have not yet answered my question.'*

*Before Thomas could reply I heard the rustle of silk at the door of the room and a woman came in. I took in the deep blue of her gown, the soft brown hair visible under her lace cap, the unblemished white of her hands and face. 'The children and I have finished, Robert,' she said, glancing at each of us as she spoke. 'I've set your plate by the hearth, to keep it warm.'*

*Thomas sprang up and made a bow. 'Thomas Aikenhead, madam.'*

*She frowned, as if presented with a puzzling question. At last she said, 'You keep my husband from his dinner, Mr Aikenhead.'*

*'It smells delicious. Mutton?'*



*'Mutton and barley broth. An old family recipe.'* She returned her attention to her husband, fixing him with a particular stare.

*'You may remember, Isobel,' Dr Carruth said to her, 'that case some years ago where I spoke before the Privy Council?'*

*Mistress Carruth nodded slowly. She turned to Thomas. 'You are the apothecary's son?'*

*'Indeed.'* There was a trace of a blush on Thomas's face. He often boasted of the skills he inherited from his father, but there was something in Mistress Carruth's tone... condescension? He did not like it.

*Dr Carruth stirred. 'Perhaps Hetty could give these young men a bowl of broth? Downstairs. I'm sure she has plenty in the pot.'* He looked at Thomas. *'Let me call one of the servants to show you to the kitchen.'*

*'The kitchen?'* Thomas raised his eyebrows, his annoyance more overt now. *'You're very kind, Dr Carruth, but I wouldn't like to inconvenience your servants.'*

*My stomach gurgled so loudly that everyone turned towards me. Patrick sniggered like a schoolboy. Mistress Carruth's mouth twitched as if she were suppressing a smile. 'I believe your friend would be happy to eat Hetty's broth in any location, Mr Aikenhead.'* She looked at me, her smile undisguised now. *'Is that not so, Mr..?'*

*'Craig,' I said. 'Kentigern Craig.'*

*Thomas smirked. 'Kentigern! A terrible mouthful of a name, don't you agree? Fear not, Mistress Carruth. We all call him Mungo.'* My face flamed with mortification, and in that moment I wished Thomas to the devil.

*'Come then,' said Dr Carruth, ringing the bell for the servant. 'Hetty will guide you to the kitchen and fill your bellies before you go.'*

*'I did not call in the hope of a meal,' Thomas said. 'Rather I wished to have a private conversation with you regarding my prospects.'*

*Dr Carruth brooded on this for a moment or two. He glanced at his wife, as if waiting for her guidance. Indeed, it was she who replied. 'May I make a suggestion?' she said. 'That you all return here a week hence to dine with us. Afterwards, Mr Aikenhead, you and my husband may have your conversation.'*

*Thomas thought about this for a moment, then bowed his acceptance of her offer.*

*We left the room, Thomas, Patrick and I following Mistress Carruth. The servant woman met us at the foot of the stair, and Mistress Carruth instructed her to show us out. As we passed the dining room door I saw two little faces – a boy and a girl – peeking round it. Mistress Carruth chided them back in. 'Your father is coming to finish his dinner, children. Stay where you are and keep him company.' They did as they were bid, staring at us with great curiosity as we passed.*

*We trooped obediently after the servant past the well-polished oak of the hallway and out onto the street.*

*'I could have done with a bowl of yon broth,' Patrick said as we retraced our steps from Drummond Street to College Wynd.*

*'Did you see how he put me in my place?' Thomas made no effort to hide his bitterness.*

*'Perhaps if you hadn't barged in...'*

*He cut me off. 'How else would I get in his company?' He kicked a loose stone across the street. It clattered against the wheel of a cart. The horse in the traces flinched and the carter shouted a curse at us. This seemed to cheer Thomas, for he continued, 'Still, we have an invitation to dine. And I believe Dr Carruth may be persuaded to assist my advancement.' He gave a little skip, like a child at play.*

*'Why would he assist you?' Patrick asked. 'You're neither kith nor kin to him.'*

*Thomas gave Patrick a knowing look. 'You wait and see, my friend. You wait and see.'*

*We parted from Thomas and went back to our lodgings. There was no sign of Hutchison in the back room, but the dog still lay in her nest by the fire. A single pup – the brindled one – suckled at her.*

*Hutchison came in from the yard, drying his hands on a cloth. 'Where are the other pups?' Patrick asked.*

*'In a sack on the bed of the Nor' Loch,' Hutchison said. 'I've just come from there.'*

*'You drowned them?'*

*He mustn't have liked the look on my face, for he rounded on me. 'How would I feed four more animals? Would you have funded their keep?'*

*Patrick hunkered down to study the dog and her remaining pup. 'At least you left her the one.'*

*'Aye. He'll help clear her milk. I'll maybe find a taker for him, if folk can be persuaded he's half mastiff.'*

*'He was Thomas's favourite,' I said.*

*'It was Thomas's favour led me to spare him,' Hutchison said, sitting down and stretching his legs out towards the fire. 'You can tell him that when next you see him.'*

I stop writing, aware suddenly of someone standing over me. It's one of the old men who works as a college messenger. I don't know his name.

'Mr Row asks to see you,' he says. I will face a reprimand, no doubt, for choosing to absent myself from this morning's lecture. It was not through cowardice, for while I do not claim to have any personal bravery I am confident the Lion of Judah would have strengthened my failing spirits. No, the reason I have spent the morning here in the library rather than in the lecture room is that this memoir of mine – this narrative of the soul – has got such a grip on me that I am only at peace when I am writing it.

I gather up my papers and go in search of John Row, weighing up whether or not I should tell him about this manuscript I am working on. Many fine men of the Kirk have produced such works. He should not disapprove. It occurs to me then that he may instead wish to address the scandal caused by Thomas's execution. While I am blameless, it could be that the University authorities have taken offence at my association with Thomas. That would account for the silence with which my peers greeted me this morning.

The Faculty is empty now, my fellow scholars dispersed in search of food and drink before the afternoon session. I go through to John Row's office at the back of the building and knock on his door. I enter at his command.

'Mr Craig,' he says, without raising his eyes from the ledger in front of him.

‘Yes, Mr Row.’ I wait, my tongue itching with explanations.

He runs one finger across a line on the ledger. ‘It has been brought to my attention,’ he says, ‘that your library fee from last year is still outstanding.’ He glances up at me.

For a moment I am speechless. This was not what I expected. I feel my face heat with humiliation. ‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ I say. ‘I had quite forgot.’ And I had. In all the turmoil of last summer, as my friendship with Thomas grew ripe and then spoiled, I had neglected the diligent attention to administration in which I usually took such pride. ‘I can pay the fee now,’ I say, ‘by which I mean, not this moment, but in a day or two. I would need to draw out some of my bursary.’

‘That’s all very well, Mr Craig,’ says Row, ‘but you have breached one of the University’s regulations. We have been too lax about such matters this last while, and the result has been clear to see.’

‘What must I do?’ I ask.

‘Pay what you owe, of course, and that as soon as possible. There must be a penalty however.’

I wait to hear what it is, calculating what inroads a fine might make on my scant funds.

‘You are suspended from the University for a period of one month from the date the fee is paid,’ he says.

The injustice of it overwhelms me. ‘This is harsh, sir. It will stand against me when I look for a Kirk congregation to appoint me minister.’

Row fixes his appraising eye on me. ‘You should have thought of that when you defaulted on your fees.’ He leans back in his seat and favours me with a

milder look. 'This is a season of scapegoats, Mr Craig. You have fared better than some.'

## Isobel

An Edinburgh lady is provided with many good reasons to make her way about the more respectable parts of the town. It is assumed she has an insatiable hunger for bonnets, ribbons and gossip. It is expected that she must ever be replenishing her supplies of needles, pins and thread. She may even - if she is particularly virtuous - take it upon herself to visit the worthy poor. A superannuated maidservant, perhaps, or the widow of her husband's groom. So it is that a few days after the gallows-guard delivers Thomas's letter to me I equip myself with my basket and a selection of explanations, and make my way into town.

I have been sleeping badly. Sometimes it is the memories of my mother's last days that keep me from my rest, but more often - to my shame - it is thoughts of Thomas that consume me. The words in his letter run round my mind. It is what he said about Mungo that troubles me most. At some point in the depth of the night I resolve that I will seek Mungo out, and hear from his own lips how he responds to Thomas's accusation.

Mungo's lodgings are above Robert Hutchison's place of business: a tall, narrow house where College Wynd opens onto the Cowgate. The lie of the street, and the height of all its buildings, means it dwells in a perpetual twilight. The front room of Hutchison's house is occupied with a shop selling such books and stationery as the young men attending the University are most likely to need, and the bedrooms above let out at rent to yet more scholars. I have never been here before, but Thomas amused us with his descriptions of Mungo's landlord's extreme thrift and carbuncular complexion. In other circumstances I

would look forward to my first sight of such an original, but today I am preoccupied by my need to see Mungo.

The shop itself is not what I expected. A muslin curtain is pulled across the window, preventing any display of goods, and there is no sign painted above the door. A small written notice declaring Hutchison's name is affixed beside the door handle. Without it I would not know I have the right place. I go inside - the door is warped, and scrapes the floorboards when I push it open - and find myself in what seems at first to be a bare room. The muslin curtain subdues what little light there is from the street, and it takes me a moment to realise that the bookshelves are empty and the trestle tables unpopulated. A pair of young men stands in conversation, although they stop speaking as I walk in, and both now stare at me. I look more closely around the shop. The back wall is fitted with a cupboard. Perhaps that is where Hutchison keeps his goods. A length of sacking is tacked over a doorway that I guess leads to the private part of the house. 'Attention here,' I call out. My voice sounds shrill in the quiet room, and the two young men appear to flinch.

There is a muddle of sounds from the back of the house. A chair pushed back, a cough, the yelp of a dog, a muttering voice and footsteps. Robert Hutchison appears in the doorway. He is taller than most men, and wearing an ancient velvet coat that is a little too short for him. There is a raised sore on his upper lip, the size and colour of a copper bawbee. It draws my eye, and he reaches up to touch it, as if self-conscious of my scrutiny.

'I see before me something outside my usual run of customer,' he says, attempting a bow. 'And may I say, it makes a pleasant change.' There is something false in the way he speaks - not simply his laboured gallantry, but in



the very tone of his voice. He is like a common actor attempting to mimic the accents of a gentleman. The two young men leave, pulling the door behind them with a scraping sound that makes my skin prickle into gooseflesh.

‘I’m afraid I am not a customer,’ I say, in what I hope is a pleasant tone. ‘I am come in search of one of your lodgers, Mr Mungo Craig.’

Hutchison scratches the sore on his lip. I can hear the rasp of his nails on the scab. ‘Might I ask who it is who seeks him?’ he says.

‘My name is Isobel Carruth. Dr Carruth’s wife, of the Pleasance.’

He makes no reply, but straightens up and saunters to the doorway into the back of the premises. There he pulls aside the sacking, purses his lips, and gives two or three sharp whistles. A dog barks in the back room and comes padding out, its claws clicking on the bare boards. Its coat is dirty white and its dark eyes narrow as it looks first at Hutchison, then at me. As if at some unseen signal it begins to growl so quietly I can barely hear it.

‘Is Mungo here?’ I say, clasping the handle of my basket tightly to disguise the trembling in my hands.

‘He’s gone, alas. Moved elsewhere.’

‘Where does he bide now?’

‘That I wouldn’t know.’

I can’t tell if he is lying. I have no skill at sniffing out untruths. ‘You must feel the lack of his rent,’ I say, reaching into my basket and pulling out my coin purse. Perhaps the clink of money will clear his mind.

Hutchison looks greedily enough at my purse, but says, ‘There’s always someone looking for decent lodgings. His bed won’t lie empty for long.’

I feel a sudden surge of dislike towards Robert Hutchison. 'I suppose the sales you made of his pamphlet will cushion you from any loss,' I blurt out. 'Did the two of you split the earnings? Or did you take the greater share, having the expense of printing and stitching it?'

Although I have not much raised my voice the dog must sense the rage within it. The growling grows louder and it bares its teeth. Hutchison murmurs something to it, and in response it advances towards me across the shop, still snarling. 'One word from me and she'll go for you, madam. Go for your face, I would think. She may mistake you for a rat.'

Both man and dog fill me with fear, but I stand my ground. 'If it does me harm I'll bring a charge against you. I'd wager you could do without a fine from the Privy Council in these hard times.'

He shakes his head, as if he is disappointed at such a paltry threat. 'I have friends aplenty in the Privy Council, madam. You cannae frighten me with them.' He scratches the sore on his lip again. 'Dr Carruth's wife, did you say? Your husband is a medical man is he? I suppose he's fond of books?'

'Yes,' I reply, puzzled by this new turn in our conversation.

'But not a customer of mine, I think?'

'Indeed not.' I cannot resist a supercilious glance around Hutchison's paltry shop.

'I trust the books in his library would bear the scrutiny of the Privy Council? They're on the scent of the freethinkers now, you know. Half the books in the town have been put to the flame. They'll be turning their attention to private libraries soon enough.'

‘We are a Christian household,’ I say, trying to conceal a fresh tremor of fear. ‘The contents of my husband’s library are beyond reproach.’

He leans against the doorframe and folds his arms. ‘Are you sure? There’s many a gentleman has volumes hidden in his library that his wife kens nothing about.’ He leers at me for a fraction of a second, and then assumes a sombre expression. ‘Imagine the shame of it, if your Christian household should be discovered to contain the same books that launched young Aikenhead on his voyage to the gallows.’

The trap snaps shut. I know that Robert is only interested in books concerned with medical matters, and his faith is of the most robust and orthodox type. Even so, if our home were to be searched by the Privy Council it would tarnish his reputation, and diminish his standing.

‘Be on your way, madam,’ Hutchison says. ‘You’ll get no intelligence from me, and if you trouble my place of business again I may be reminded to point our friends in the Privy Council towards your family.’ He stares at me in silence then whistles to the dog. The two of them return to the back of the house, leaving me alone to wrench open the warped door of the shop.

My anger hastens my steps as I walk home, but my heavy skirts impede my stride, and I curse the layers of silk and linen that tangle around my legs and slow my progress. A memory flashes through my mind of running across the fields at Lauder when I was a child, the wet grass soaking my shoes and my heart pounding as fast as my feet. I must have been very young – too young for full skirts and petticoats and stays. Now I must moderate my step, which makes me brood more deeply on my encounter with Hutchison. His reaction to my

questions bespeaks guilt, and if he is guilty it is a mere step of logic to conclude that so too is Mungo. It seems a final injustice that Mungo's words of condemnation are preserved forever in his wretched pamphlet, while Thomas's voice is silenced.

I formulate a plan as I walk home. It is so simple I wonder why I did not think of it before. I will make copies of Thomas's speech, and circulate them around the town. It may not cause the sensation a printed pamphlet would, but my handwritten efforts will serve. I know enough of Edinburgh's appetite for gossip to be confident that the key parts of its contents will soon be common knowledge.

Once back in the Pleasance I acquit myself of my household duties as swiftly as I decently can, and adjourn to my desk. I am a quick scribe, although not as neat as I might be, and before an hour passes I have progressed to my third copy of Thomas's letter and speech. My right hand aches, and my fingers are spotted with ink. I am so absorbed in my task that I do not notice Agnes until she is standing by my side.

'Dr Maxwell is here to call on you, miss,' she says, peeping over my shoulder at the papers in front of me. I must stare at her dumbly, for she goes on, 'To offer his condolences, I expect.'

'Yes. Of course. Show him up. ' I sand the page I have been writing on and put it aside. There is no hiding my ink-stained hands however.

I rise to meet Dr Maxwell as he enters the parlour. He is taller than Robert and moves with great assurance. There is nothing remarkable in his features – he is neither strikingly handsome nor repugantly coarse – but there is something in his appearance that attracts the gaze. His eyes, perhaps, which

have a sleepy look whatever time of day it is. However, the sharp bite of the January air does not agree with his complexion. When he takes my hand and kisses it, his lips feel chapped. I look him in the face and see that his skin is dry and rough.

‘I was sorry to hear of your loss, Mistress Carruth. How are you bearing up?’

‘Well enough, thank you,’ I say, motioning for him to sit. ‘I have plenty to keep me busy, which is a blessing.’

‘I suppose Carruth is out consorting with his lady patients, instead of attending to you?’ he says, with the merest hint of a twinkle in his eye.

I feel a tiny spasm of unease that Dr Maxwell had chosen to call when there is a good chance of Robert being away from home. ‘Stop trying to make mischief,’ I chide. My voice sounds brittle and false. Robert left in a sour mood this morning. He is still brooding about my visit from the gallows-guard.

Dr Maxwell shrugs. ‘If it falls to me to console you, I suppose I must thole it.’

I am suddenly disgusted with him. In his eyes my bereavement is nothing more than an opportunity for flirtation. I hope this visit will be brief. He must sense my change in mood, because his face becomes serious, and he says, ‘Forgive me. That was ill judged. You must be suffering greatly.’

Am I suffering? I do not think so. The only feeling I am aware of is a kind of lightheadedness, as if there is a pane of glass between the rest of humanity and myself. ‘On the contrary, I am... a blank. I feel nothing. I’m afraid I am quite unnatural.’

‘No, no. It is the shock.’

‘Am I not cold-blooded?’

Dr Maxwell lifts my hand again and gently presses each of my fingertips in turn with his thumb. 'There is no such thing as a cold-blooded woman.'

For a moment I am hypnotised by his voice and the sensation of his skin against mine. At last I rouse myself from his spell and ease my hand out of his.

We sit in awkward silence until he speaks again, his voice still softer than usual. 'Your mother... what was it took her? Forgive a physician's curiosity.'

This is safer ground, but no easier to tread. 'She had a fall at her house in Lauder, on the stairs down to the kitchen - they are stone, and quite uneven - and her leg was broken.'

'A fracture can be a serious matter.'

'That was not all.' I take a deep breath before I go on. 'When Hetty went to undress her, she found a deep wound.'

'On her leg?'

'No.' I hold my hand over my left breast, to show where the sore had been.

'The flesh within was quite rotten.'

'And she was in great pain?'

'From head to toe.'

He nods, a grim expression on his face. 'A cancer, then. The broken leg was but a sign that the weakness had seeped into her bones. What did Carruth do for her?'

'He had brought opium with him. It gave her some relief at first, thank God, but at the end not so much.' I try to blink away the images that are burned on my memory. 'We prayed for it to be over.'

'My poor girl.'

At any other time I might have smiled at his words. It is many years since I have been a girl. I make an effort to pull myself together. 'You are very kind, Dr Maxwell, to listen to me.' He bows in acknowledgement. Over the years I have heard many rumours about Dr Maxwell - there are said to have been several illicit entanglements - but at this moment he has every appearance of being the most sincere gentleman in the kingdom.

He reaches out and takes my hand again, examining the ink stains on my fingers. 'You have been hard at work with your pen, I see. I hope I'm not keeping you from your correspondence?'

I stand, walk to my desk, and lift one of the copies of Thomas's letter and speech. The decision to confide in Dr Maxwell is taken almost before I know it. 'I would value your thoughts on these pages,' I say, handing them to him.

He takes the manuscript and reads. I sit and wait, watching the expression on his face. He gives little of his opinion away, only raising an eyebrow once or twice. At length he finishes and looks over at me. 'How did you come by this?'

'I went to the Gallowlee yesterday, to arrange for Thomas's burying. The gallows-guard found the papers in Thomas's pocket.'

He sits back in his seat, and regards me with a serious expression in his eyes. 'Was Carruth with you?' When I shake my head he says, 'You did not go alone, I hope?'

'Yes, quite alone. I saw Katharine Aikenhead there.'

'The sister?' He leans towards me with a grave expression on his face. 'If you care to take the advice of an old friend, do not ally yourself with the likes of Katharine Aikenhead.'

‘There is no danger of that. I offered what help I could, but she spurned it.

She seemed angry with me. It is the grief, I suppose.’

‘They were always a trouble-prone family.’ He glances at my desk. ‘Do I conclude you have been making copies of these papers? To what purpose?’

‘To let Thomas have his reply against his accusers, against Mungo Craig...’

‘Ah yes. Young Mungo. The Judas of our tale.’

I turn to him. ‘Are you certain?’

‘The talk is it was he who informed on Thomas. There’s no evidence.’

‘I welcomed him to this house. He ate food at my table.’

‘You nursed a viper. Be thankful it was not you who felt his sting.’

‘He was Thomas’s friend.’

Maxwell shrugs. ‘Who else has more means to betray us than our friends? Or more cause.’

Is it safe to criticise the authorities to Dr Maxwell? Safe or not, I carry on.

‘We both know that Mungo’s testimony would have meant little on its own. The Privy Council were fixed on hanging Thomas from the outset.’

‘Yes.’

‘What are we to do, when our leaders can murder a boy on a whim? What kind of country are we?’

He sighs, and looks at the papers again. ‘You have not explained to me why you are making these copies.’

‘I will distribute them – discreetly – around the town. In coffee shops and the like.’ How foolish the idea sounds, now that it is spoken out loud! The expression on Dr Maxwell’s face seems to echo my own doubts.



‘I do not understand why you feel so compelled to act. You realise in doing so you may draw the attention of the Privy Council down on your own head? Thomas cannot be resurrected no matter what you do, so why take such a risk?’

‘It seems an injustice to me that Thomas has had no right to reply to Mungo’s accusations. I know that what’s been done cannot be undone, but I can at least give him his voice. And my conscience is troubling me: had we been here in Edinburgh for the trial we might have helped him. Provided money for an advocate. Robert has one or two acquaintances on the Privy Council who could have been spoken to.’

He takes my hand in his again. ‘Your mother was dying. Your place was by her side. You have a tender heart, and are stricken with guilt, but - believe me - there’s nothing to be gained from such thoughts.’

I allow my hand to lie still under his. ‘Perhaps we can learn from what befell Thomas. If we examine the signs that led to his undoing, we can be on our guard against their recurrence. My children have bright, enquiring minds, and I must protect them.’

‘You will not protect them by putting yourself in harm’s way.’

At once I am irritated with Dr Maxwell. His jaded charm, his pragmatic dismissal of Thomas’s death, his practised way of finding excuses to touch my hand. I stand and walk to the window, looking out into the street in the hope of calming myself. Reckless thoughts tumble through my head, and I must not speak them. Outside the day carries on like any other. The heavy cloud of yesterday has gone, and the air is bright with chilly sunlight. Maids sweep their masters’ front steps; respectable wives and daughters step out with their baskets on their arms, in search of shopping and conversation; a gentleman on a dapple

grey gelding clip-clops his way along the length of the street. I hear Dr Maxwell rise and walk towards me. 'You were fond of the boy,' he says. His voice is uncharacteristically frank.

'I was,' I say, still staring out the window. There is a tremor in my voice. 'I think Robert rather resented it. He was more in sympathy with Mungo.'

'I take it Carruth knows nothing of your plans to distribute Thomas's papers?'

I notice the faintest change in Dr Maxwell's expression. There is a hint of something predatory. 'He would disapprove,' I say, realising as I speak that my words will be like bait to him.

'Perhaps you would permit me to be your helpmeet in the task,' he says. 'Let me take one of your copies. I know a poor clerk who will reproduce it as many times as needed, and in such a strange hand that no one will trace it back to him.'

'And would you be able to circulate it?'

'Of course.'

'You said a moment ago that it was a risky enterprise. Is the danger not as great for you as it is for me?'

He smiles. 'I have more experience in covering my tracks than you have – which is quite as it should be.'

The door to the room opens, and Margaret slips in. She stops when she sees Dr Maxwell, and regards him coolly.

'Are you playing hide and seek, my darling?' I say, conscious of the heat in my face. I hope I am not blushing, but fear I am.

'Not hide and seek, no. I'm hiding from Alison.'

‘Is she cross with you?’

‘Of course not. She only ever chides Henry, not me.’

Dr Maxwell interjects, ‘So why hide from her then?’

Margaret tilts her head to one side in a way that looks affected, but I know is not. ‘She is very pleasant, but sometimes her company grows tedious.’

Dr Maxwell laughs out loud. He glances in my direction. ‘You are correct, Mistress Carruth, about the cleverness of your children. But now I must go. May I take a set of the papers?’

‘Of course.’ I retrieve the necessary pages from my desk and hand them to him.

He offers me a knowing smile, kisses my hand yet again, and leaves, bidding me to give his regards to Robert.

Margaret runs to the window and looked out, watching him descend the house steps and walk on his way up the Pleasance. ‘Who is that man?’ she says.

‘He is Doctor Maxwell, an acquaintance of your father’s.’

‘And he thinks I am clever?’

‘Yes.’

She ponders this for a moment. ‘Alison thinks I am clever,’ she says at last, ‘and Alison is a fool.’

Another Sabbath day tightens its grasp on Edinburgh. The weekday jostle of commerce is stilled, and an observer looking up and down the High Street might fancy this a city whose citizens have fled. Of course there can be no such observer, for every decent man is in Kirk, like as not on his knees, imploring the

Lord for forgiveness. Robert and I are among that number, with Henry and Margaret alongside us, and the servants in their own places towards the back.

We have barely settled in our seats when a murmur of conversation begins at the rear of the Kirk, moving through the congregation like a wave on the sea. I turn to see what the cause of it is. A group of plainly-dressed elders are processing up the nave, and in their midst is a wretched looking youth, dirty and lean. He is clad in a roughly made sackcloth robe, and his naked arms look indecent in such a setting. One of the elders bustles on ahead, and lifts the penitent's stool from a corner, placing it in the centre of the Kirk. The unfortunate sinner clambers up onto it and sits, his head bowed. I see now that his legs are bare and shoeless. His feet are filthy with dirt and blood.

'Who is it?' I whisper to Robert.

'It must be that fellow Frazer. The other blasphemer. He's obliged to do penance in all the Kirks of the city.'

Reverend Crawford pronounces the absolution, leads us through the Lord's Prayer, and announces that day's psalm. The congregation rise to their feet, and the air is filled with the rustle of silk as the ladies smooth their skirts. I glance down at Margaret, to make sure her dress is not crumpled, but she is already shaking out the creases. She must sense me looking at her, for she glances up with a hint of challenge on her face. I lean over and adjust her shawl. If we were anywhere else she would pull away, but here, under the eye of Reverend Crawford, she endures my interference. She takes advantage of the moment to stare at Frazer, still perched on his stool. I too find my gaze drawn towards him. His story was the subject of much debate the summer before. He dared to question God's word in a private conversation that was soon passed on to the

Privy Council, and has lain in the Tolbooth ever since. Each Sunday he is brought out to be paraded for the correction of all our souls – and as a warning to other young men who might be of the same mind. This punishment is regarded as mercy. I suppose it is, compared with the vengeance that swallowed up Thomas.

Henry, meanwhile, is oblivious to this, gazing up into the rafters. I wonder what has enchanted him - a sparrow perhaps, hiding from the cold - but I do not dare follow his example. Ten-year-old boys might be allowed to let their thoughts wander from Divine Service, but their mothers are not be granted the same dispensation.

The thought of the day ahead weighs down on me. There will be nothing to fill it but piety and despair. Our Sabbath will wend its penitential way to evening, and as darkness closes in the whole household will gather in the parlour for more prayers. Robert will read from the Bible. We are working our way through it - one chapter per day, and two on Sundays - and have reached the fifty-ninth chapter of Isaiah. That strange, prophetic book disturbs me. It flits from implacable vengeance to compassion expressed with such tender poetry that it brings tears to my eyes. The only mercy is that January days are short. I can retire to my bed not long after nightfall. In the dark of the bedchamber there is no stern Presbyter to overlook me, no watchful acquaintances to scrutinise my every word. In the other-world behind my closed eyelids I can say and do as I please - and dream away the time until Monday and freedom, of sorts.

At last the Reverend Crawford steps up into the pulpit to begin his sermon. This marks the middle-ground of the service. His sermons are notoriously long,

but I console myself that when this part is done we will be well past the halfway point. Reverend Crawford's sermons are not much admired by the congregation. He is a learned man, and it seems sometimes that his knowledge has turned his mind into a thing of great complexity but little practical use. Even Robert, conventional as he is, complains that he understands less of God's intentions at the end of one of Crawford's sermons than he did at its beginning. Still, his voice is soothing, and I view the sermon as an opportunity for my own contemplations. I bow my head decorously. It will be assumed by any who care to look that my mind is turned on holy matters.

'In the Gospel of Luke,' Reverend Crawford begins, 'in the twenty-second chapter, starting at the twenty-first verse, it is written: "But, behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table. And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed! And they began to enquire among themselves, which of them it was that should do this thing."' His words make me raise my head. Reverend Crawford peers over the pulpit. For a moment it seems that he is looking straight at me. 'We know, of course, who the traitor was.'

'Judas,' Margaret whispers, just loudly enough for me to hear.

'Judas Iscariot,' Reverend Crawford says, as if echoing Margaret. 'An untrue friend. A faithless disciple. We condemn him, do we not? To betray the Son of God for thirty pieces of silver! What sort of man could do such a thing? Not you or I. We would be steadfast, would we not? True unto death!' He glares round the congregation, and keeps silent so long that people begin to shift in their seats. When he speaks again his voice is softer. 'Look into your hearts,' he says. 'Have you ever let a friend down to spare yourself some trouble? Have you ever

told a lie that would advantage you? I know I have.' He points down at Frazer, who sits as he has all through the service. 'Look at this poor wretch here, clothed in the sackcloth and ashes of the repentant sinner. He has done great wrong, admitted and acknowledged. But what think we of the man who betrayed him? A good Christian? How much better would it have been if that man – instead of skulking off to his betters – had admonished this sinner to acknowledge his wrongdoing. Had prayed with him and for him. Had engaged the offices of a minister of religion. The Good Shepherd rejoices at the safe return of the lost sheep. He does not demand its destruction.'

My heart is battering inside my ribcage as if I had just climbed the steepest wynd in the city. What has got into Reverend Crawford? It seems he is not simply condemning Judas, the betrayer of the Son of God, but every faithless creature who gives up their friend to the cruelty of the law. Is this his covert way of condemning those who betrayed Thomas? According to Dr Maxwell the whole city think it was Mungo. Is he Reverend Crawford's target? The idea of Mungo hounded and reviled thrills me in a way I am sure is not Christian. Perhaps this is how Thomas's persecutors felt as they closed in on him. I begin to understand how intoxicating such a pursuit might be.

At last the service ends. Frazer is led through the church and out, back to his prison cell. We remain in our seats as the first surge of people pushes towards the door. Henry kicks his toes absentmindedly against the pew in front of us until Robert leans over, taps him on the knee and shakes his head sternly at him. When the crush subsides somewhat we stand and make our own way out. A lady who is our neighbour in the Pleasance takes my hand and offers her condolences. For a moment I do not understand her, and then remember that I

am a woman mourning her mother. Other people of our acquaintance follow the neighbour's lead, and murmur appropriate words.

I glimpse Dr Maxwell through the crowd. He nods over in my direction, his eyes meeting mine for a fraction longer than is usual.



**Mungo**

*To Mr. John Row, Regent of the Faculty of Divinity, University of Edinburgh*

*13<sup>th</sup> January 1697*

*Dear Sir*

*As I hope you will now be cognisant of, the debt mentioned in our conversation of two days ago has been discharged. I apologise most humbly for the oversight on my part that led to this embarrassment, and trust that you will forgive it with that same spirit of justice and mercy you have so often displayed in your care towards we who are fortunate enough to be shepherded through our studies by you.*

*On the matter of my suspension from the University, I acknowledge that this punishment is fully merited. I do not plea for clemency on grounds of my own superiority, or with any suggestion that the penalty is unjust. However, I do implore you to readmit me to my studies at the earliest opportunity, out of compassion for my aged mother. You will know that I am the fatherless only child of a poor family, and every week of delay in my being ready to seek Godly employment in the world is another week that my poor mother must scrape by on the few pence she is capable of earning. She is afflicted by a tremor, and her hands are greatly twisted and painful, which makes such occupations as a woman of her station might typically hold, viz washerwoman, seamstress & co almost impossible.*

I stop writing. This grovelling sits badly with me. I know it is pride that causes me to stumble, and that pride is a sin. It is also a luxury that I cannot afford.

I step away from my desk and lift my New Testament from the bookshelf, flicking the pages forward until I find the Book of Revelation.

*And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey.* It is no good. Not even the strange alluring terror of John's visions can brace my mind. Down in the kitchen Hutchison embarks on a bout of coughing. It has been getting worse these past few days. Thomas might have made a tincture to relieve it. He had his father's talent for compounding cures. Thomas again. Always Thomas. I must continue to write him down, to turn him from memory to pen scratches on white paper. That might contain him.

*When did the snake slither into the garden? An angel gave me a book, and I consumed it, and the words were sweet as honey in my mouth, but bitter as gall and wormwood in my soul. 'See here,' Thomas had said, in his special library voice – soft but clear. Quiet enough not to stir the library clerk from his mid-term slumber. Thomas turned the book and pushed it across the table towards me. 'This Toland fellow says Christ deliberately chose his disciples from the ignorant classes. Do you see?' He traced his finger along the relevant passage. Thomas could read upside down, no matter how small the print.*

*I countered his ideas with ease. 'Was that not to show that his message was for all men? The humblest as well as the greatest?'*

*He shook his head with a smile. 'That's a pretty turn to put on the story. What Toland says, and he may have a point, is that those Christ chose were block-headed fellows, and more easily gulled. Think about it, Mungo. When my*

*poor old pa and I were out selling his worthless cure-alls, it wasn't the philosophers who were queuing up to buy them. Oh no. If you want an audience for nonsense you must pick one that has no schooling.' He passed the book across the table towards me. 'Read for yourself. Tell me what you think.'*

*That must have been the start of it. The first breath of doubt. The thrill – the terror – that such thoughts had been thought, and committed to paper, and were now dancing through the summer air in that bright room. These notions appalled me with their cruel truth. The world tilted and trembled, as if its very foundations were an illusion. An idea once thought cannot be unthought. The book slid to and fro across the table between us, its cloth binding hissing against the oak with each exchange.*

*Some days later Thomas invited me to dine at his apartment. I had assumed that he was – like me – in lodgings, but it emerged as we walked toward the Netherbow that he did, in fact, own the property and lived there with his sister. He had so often bemoaned his impecunious state that I expected something meanly proportioned and humble, but the apartment was capacious, albeit sparsely furnished. I could stand tall in it without my head brushing the rafters. Stretch out my long, dockman's arms without touching a wall. What did it signify if the air was foul with the cess thrown into the close beyond the windows? The windows themselves were tall and broad. If they hadn't been so smutted with soot they'd have let in as much light as the ones in the library. 'I thought you said you were a poor orphan,' I said.*

*'And so I am.'*

*'But this - ' I swept my arms around the sheer, astounding space of it. 'This must be worth a pretty penny.'*

*Thomas crouched down at the hearth and studied the fire laid there in some perplexity. 'Should I light it? If I do, Katharine will likely scold me for starting it too early. But if I don't, she'll scold me for letting her come in to a cold house after her day's work.' He smiled up at me. 'What was it you were saying?'*

*I recalled – just in time – that a gentleman does not discuss financial matters. 'Have you lived here long?' I said.*

*'A while now. Katharine takes charge of all that. We are indeed poor orphans, as you point out, but we are in possession of a benefactor. My aged godfather. A relic from the glory days of the Aikenhead clan.'*

*'That is fortunate.' I confess that the poison of bitterness flowed through me at that moment.*

*Thomas stood, gazing once more at the hearth. 'I dare not light it. Can you bear the cold a while longer? Summer is turned, and no mistake. Take a seat, man. Be comfortable.'*

*So I sat and we talked. Rather, Thomas talked, perching on a seat one minute, his foot tapping on the bare boards, then springing up and striding backwards and forwards like one of our livelier lecturers. Today's great news – the removal of certain books from the University library – was his sole topic.*

*'It's a bad business, don't you think?' he said again. 'Are our minds to be kept shut up, like some maiden walled into a tower? And who are these men of the Privy Council who take it upon themselves to decide what we may and may not read?'*

*'I suppose the University...'*

*'Pah! Don't talk to me about them.'* He stalked over to the window.

*'Spineless. Craven. They should be defending our freedoms, not colluding with those dullards in the Privy Council.'* He spoke with his back to the window. His face was in shadow, but the weak daylight at his back surrounded him with a soft corona, picking out a hint of copper in his hair I had never noticed before. He turned to look out the window. *'Ah,'* he said, *'here is Katharine coming now. We shall have some heat at last.'*

*'You must be the poet?'* Katharine smiled. The smile was so like Thomas's. It was the clearest evidence of their kinship.

*'I would not... dare to give myself that title,'* I stumbled.

*'My brother has shown me some of your little odes. Very deft.'*

*My mind jangled. There was flattery in her words, admiration too. And yet I perceived a barb of condescension. But Thomas must have liked my scribbling well enough to show it to her. No condescension from him, at any rate.*

*'Poor Mungo,'* he said. *'I've never seen a fellow less comfortable with attention. However will you manage when you're in the pulpit?'*

*Katharine was emptying her basket of its cargo of bread and eggs. 'Light the fire, Thomas,'* she said. *'I have a twist of tealeaves here. Have you fetched water for the kettle?'*

*Of course he had not. While he was out of the room I stood, awkward, too big in spite of the space. Katharine kept moving about the room. Lifting crockery from a cupboard, cracking eggs into a bowl, flouring the griddle and swinging the crane over the fire. She had Thomas's restlessness, but all her movements were justified by practical intention. To tidy, to clear, to cook, to*

*feed. Perhaps all women were like this. My mother was, in her slow, arthritic way. I had never been much in the company of women, I realised, and felt the sweat prickle on my face. I was relieved when Thomas returned.*

*Neither Thomas nor Katharine were big eaters. Their restraint inhibited me. Left to myself I could have cleared my plate and theirs too, but instead I picked genteelly at the strange consturge of eggs, bread and scallion that Katharine had concocted. Thomas preferred to talk than eat. Katharine listened as he repeated his outrage at the removal of the books from the library.*

*'Atheistical, they call them,' he said.*

*'Well,' I dared, 'I suppose they are atheistical.' Brother and sister both stared at me. She was not bonny – no one would think that – but there was something... Handsome. That was the word. A face that would suit the middle years of life better than youth. 'They find fault with Christianity. Pick holes in it.'*

*'If Christianity cannot bear a little scrutiny, then it's a poor sort of religion.'* He was silent for a moment, pushing the egg mixture around his plate with a crust of bread. *'Here's what perplexes me about the whole business, Mungo. The Bible tells us we are sinners, and therefore deserving of punishment.'*

*'Aye, but God sent his son to become man, and suffer that punishment in our stead.'*

*He fixed me with a particular look I had never seen before. Sincere, his eyes dark with doubt. 'That's what doesn't make sense. Let us say I was to commit a crime, and am lying in prison for it, and you go to the judge and say "Punish me, in place of him." Why, the judge would tell you to catch yourself on.'*

*'You are applying the reasoning of this world to the workings of God.'*

*'Believe me, Mungo, I have turned this over and over in my mind. What need for Christ to die? God is omnipotent. If he wants to forgive us he can do it, in the blink of an eye. No need for him to sacrifice his son.'*

*'The problem with Thomas,' Katharine said, 'is that he thinks too much.'*

*'Why would God give me the power of reason, if he did not intend me to use it?'*

*'Be careful, Thomas,' she chided gently. 'I heard today that there's a man taken up for blasphemy.'*

*'Is he from the University?'*

*Katharine shook her head. 'Just a clerk, I think.'*

*'It is, perhaps, a pity that we read those books,' I said, 'if they planted this seed in your mind.' My words sounded hollow, like lines spoken by an actor. The tendrils of doubt that had burst forth that first day in the library were growing stronger, probing through my own mind, like roots spreading and dividing in the darkness.*

*'You misunderstand the situation, Mungo. I used to wonder why no one else could see that the equation does not come out aright. I thought I was the only one, but since reading those books I know that others – Toland, Blount, Spinoza – are of the same mind. The Privy Council may take the books – burn them, confine them, whatever it is they mean to do – but they cannot confine the ideas contained therein.'*

*Katharine went over to the hearth and lifted the teapot that was warming there. 'Will you take a cup, Mr Craig?' she asked.*

*Tea. A rare luxury in my mother's house, and likewise in my lodgings.*

*'Thank you, yes.' As she poured I studied her. Older than Thomas, of course, by some five or more years, and older still in her actions. What did she really think of her brother's notions? Should I ask her? I did not know if it was usual to engage a woman in such a discussion.*

*'D'you know, Mungo,' Thomas said, 'I have been asking myself these questions for as long as I can remember.' He took a sip of his tea and continued. 'All I have ever sought is the truth. But it seems the harder I pursue it, the more it eludes me.'*

*The truth. Until I met Thomas, it had never occurred to me to question it.*

*A week after our first visit to Dr Carruth's house we were seated at his table, which was spread more generously than any I had seen before. His wife sat, slender as a wand, shadows of weariness smudged under her eyes. Her blue gown rustled when she rose, or sat, or turned in her seat. The children stared up at us as they supped. The boy was particularly taken with Thomas. The girl seemed fixed on me, watching me as a cat might stand guard over a promising gap in the wainscot.*

*The silence was wound tight as a spring following Dr Carruth's terse answer to Thomas's question. 'What was your father, Dr Carruth?' he had said, his voice all innocence, enjoying the long moment until our host gave a terse reply.*

*Odd that Thomas never tried to trip me with such a question. I wondered if this was how my future would be. If I climbed through the ranks of the church, married well, acquired land, would some whippersnapper still be able to topple me with that question? What was your father? Poor father. The only favour he*



*ever did me was to die young. His expiry was my free passport to the school for fatherless bairns.*

*'What of you, Mr Craig?' said Mistress Carruth. 'Are you destined for medicine too?*

*'The Kirk, I hope.' My words sounded unclear, as if my tongue were too big for my mouth. What must she have thought?*

*'But Mungo has a freethinking streak in him,' Thomas said.*

*'Does he?' Dr Carruth regarded me with the first spark of interest he'd shown.*

*I tried to think of a suitable reply in order to keep his attention, but before I could Thomas moved the conversation on. 'Look at Middleton, there,' he said, drawing everyone's eyes to Patrick. 'He looks as if he hasn't seen roast meat in a month.' Patrick's mouth was stuffed with beefsteak, and he jawed frantically, growing redder in the face as he did so. I caught a glance pass between Thomas and Mistress Carruth – conspiratorial, mocking – and I felt a rare pang of pity for Patrick.*

*'Dr Carruth,' Thomas said, turning back to our host, 'how will I find my feet as a physician? Who will take me on as an apprentice, when I have few connections and precious little money?'*

*'There'll be time enough to worry about that when you have completed your studies,' Dr Carruth said, a careful look on his face.*

*Thomas did not reply, but took a mouthful of food and chewed it a deal more elegantly than Patrick could manage. He swallowed, and said, 'Do you remember, Dr Carruth, that odd court case my father was involved in? I recall*

*very little.' He glanced around the table with a smile. 'It was a disordered time in the Aikenhead family history.'*

*'I remember it,' said Dr Carruth in that clipped way he had.*

*Thomas leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling as if trying to retrieve some memory from the air. 'There was a red-haired woman, was there not?' he said. 'Bonny, in her way – that's why I remember her, no doubt.'*

*Another smile. 'But still, there was something about her that scared me a little.'*

*'Elizabeth Edmonstone,' Mistress Carruth said, never taking her eyes off her husband. 'The late Laird of Duntreath's daughter.'*

*'Ah,' said Thomas. 'That accounts for her... air. What became of her?'*

*There's another awkward silence.*

*'She married well enough,' said Dr Carruth. 'One of the Ulster Montgomerys, I believe.'*

*Thomas took a mouthful of wine, then another. He dabbed his mouth with a napkin. 'How is it the gentry always bounce back, eh? Still, there's little to be gained from bitterness, don't you agree?'*

*Dr Carruth stood up. 'Perhaps, Thomas, we should adjourn to my consulting room to discuss your prospects. It may, after all, be wise to plan ahead.' He glanced around the room at the rest of us. 'There's no need to bore everyone else with our medical talk.'*

*Thomas sprang up and followed Dr Carruth out of the room. Mistress Carruth looked subdued for some minutes. Her sharp-eyed daughter regarded her slyly. Patrick continued to chew stolidly, clearly thinking to make the best of the victuals while they lasted. At last Mistress Carruth roused herself and turned to me with a smile that might have convinced a less perceptive man than*

*myself. 'So, Mr Craig,' she said, 'tell me about this freethinking streak Thomas says you have.'*

*'The problem is,' said Thomas, 'lack of funds.' He handed me the long-stemmed pipe and stretched out the full length of my bed, so that his boots touched one wall and his head the other. 'How in the name of goodness do you fit into this cot, Mungo? You're twice the size of me.'*

*I did not indulge in the tobacco but passed the pipe to Patrick, who was perched on the windowsill. He sucked on the pipe, holding the sweet smoke in for as long as he could, then blew it into the room before embarking on a fit of coughing and sneezing.*

*'Surely you could turn that rhyming of yours to profit,' Thomas said, staring up at the ceiling. 'There's a hawker on every corner selling pamphlets and song sheets. Couldn't you come up with some doggerel to please the common man?'*

*'Doggerel?' I felt a surge of grievance in my heart. He had not always been so dismissive of my poetry.*

*Thomas laughed. 'Och, poor Mungo. If you could see your face. You're like a beaten dog.'*

*'You could make some money with your cures, Thomas,' Patrick said. 'That plook on Mr Hutchison's face cleared up right and well.'*

*Thomas considered this. 'What if,' he said, 'I invented a remedy for death?'*

*'That would sell well,' I said, aiming for a sarcastic tone.*

*He sat up, eyes blazing, fingers drumming on his kneecaps. 'A sovereign antidote,' he declaimed, like a street preacher. 'It will cure a man though he be*

*speldered like a haddock!' I couldn't help but smile, although I didn't want to forgive him his slight.*

*'Anything else?' asked Patrick, joining in.*

*'A recipe for making the Philosopher's stone, at a cost of only two Scot's pounds. Just imagine it! The national debt would be paid in a trice. No need for taxes. The King could fight all the wars he pleases, and never ask parliament for a penny.'*

*'Very commendable,' I said, abandoning my sulk, 'but somewhat lacking in ambition.'*

*Thomas sprang up off the bed, beckoned to Patrick for the pipe, and took another deep inhalation. He blew the smoke in rings. They looped through the air, turning and twisting until he waved them into nothingness. 'A ship that can travel to the moon, and anywhere else you care to mention.' He smiled benignly. 'After all, if man can build a ship that travels through water, why not one that travels through the air.'*

*Patrick clapped his hands together. 'Bravo, Thomas. Bravo.'*

*Thomas gave him the pipe again, and hurled himself back down on my bed. There was an unhealthy series of creaks from its unsteady frame. 'Seriously, though,' he said. 'We have to do something.'*

Patrick clumps up the stairs. He stops on the landing. The boards creak as he waits there. At last he knocks my bedroom door and walks in. He looks earnestly at me, and then at my desk. 'Are you working?' he says. I notice he has a scrolled piece of paper in his hand.

*'In a manner of speaking, yes,' I say. 'No matter.'*

He chews his lip.

‘Is there any news around the town?’ I say.

‘You should see this.’ He hands me the paper.

I unroll it, note that it is written in a neat secretary hand, and read the title: *The Last Speech of Thomas Aikenhead, written by Him the Night before his Execution at the Gallowlee, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1697, and Entrusted to the Care of his Closest Friends.* ‘How did you come by this?’ I say.

‘It was in Dalton’s, among the newspapers.’ He sits down carefully on the edge of my bed. ‘Read the last part, Mungo. The paragraph but one before the end.’

I do as he bids me. Thomas denies my assertions – must he get the last word, even now? But worse, much worse. That I am as guilty as he. In my memory I hear the *hiss, hiss, hiss* as we push that damned book to and fro across the library table. A sick shudder runs through my body like a sudden ague. ‘Did you see anyone else read this?’ I say.

Patrick doesn’t meet my eye. ‘There was more than one copy in Dalton’s. And I heard a fellow say he’d already come upon it at the library.’

‘And what are people saying about it? They surely don’t believe him, do they?’

Patrick makes no response, but the reddening of his face gives me my answer. I set the paper aside and look down at my day’s work. The latest instalment of my spiritual memoir. The unfinished letter to John Row. All futile, utterly futile. My efforts are entirely undone. But before I fall completely into despair I feel the first pulse of anger. Thomas means to carry me after him.

The rising nausea of fear. Will there be action taken? 'Has anyone spoken to you about me?' I say to Patrick. 'Asked questions?'

'People have talked of little else.'

'No, I mean -' I fetch a handkerchief from my pocket and wipe my face.

'The authorities. Have you - ?'

'No. None of that sort has approached me. Not yet.' He offers no promises.

That time is past.

This is calumny. No less. I will wash mine hands in innocency. For I *am* innocent. What was it Plautus said? *One who has done no wrong ought to be bold, yes, and self-confident and forward in his own defence.* Let the lying lips be put to silence. But they are silent. They were. They ought to be. Silenced by his great swollen tongue. I saw a hanged man once. The tongue black. Long as a cow's. No. Push that thought away. His mouth filled with earth at the gallows' foot. Better. Almost poetry. Ten beats. What rhyme for foot? Boot? Root? Soot? No. Stop it. Calumny, remember?

What was that line from Horace... *If anyone pursues me with a poisonous tooth, shall I, unavenged, weep like a child?* No. No. I will not. What's that? Hutchison shouting from downstairs, and Patrick joining in. Arms around me – dear Lord, they are come for me already, they mean to take me and hang me! I lash out with all my strength and am free. I lunge for the door, but Hutchison is there, blocking my way, the white dog at his heel, her teeth bared in a snarl.

'For God's sake, calm yourself,' he says. I stand gasping, slowing my breath, feeling the storm surge of my rage ebb away, until all that remains of it is a strong, steady current of resentment. I turn and see Patrick spreadeagled on the floor. He struggles to his feet.

‘I was only trying to save you from harming yourself,’ he says, a hurt expression on his face. Did I hit the wall in my rage? My knuckles are ringing as if I’ve been boxing.

‘Are you done, Mr Craig?’ Hutchison says. ‘Can we leave you without fear that you’ll pull the house down around our ears?’

I nod, afraid to open my mouth in case the fury is only slumbering. Patrick backs out of the room and then he and Hutchison tramp down the stairs. The dog stays for a moment, staring at me, until Hutchison calls her and she too goes.

Steady now. Here’s pen. Here’s ink. Here’s paper. Stretch out my fingers. Nothing broken. A vindication. Yes. That’s what is needed. A vindication of Mr Mungo Craig. From a calumny cast upon him by T.A. Set it out properly. Section 1. Yes. Containing the Introduction, the Calumny, and some General Observations. That’s the way. Calm. Thoughtful. Measured. Where’s my Bible? I need to read it. Take succour from it. And quotations. *Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son he receiveth*. I must prove myself a Christian.

Does Thomas think I dare not speak ill of the dead? He thinks wrong.

## Isobel

If I thought that distributing Thomas's speech might quell my discontent, I prove myself mistaken. Yes, I feel a certain pride that I am the means of letting his voice be heard, although I must admit to myself that my satisfaction is laced through with vanity. How many other women of my station can say they have presided over such a sharing of truth?

Beneath these feelings, though, is the tremor of fear. Even as I sleep I am aware of it stirring, and I wake in the morning with it fluttering in my breast. I try to reason it away. Dr Maxwell is the only one who knows of my role, and I am sure he will not betray me. He enjoys secrets. And after all, what wrong have I done? No law has been broken. Still, there is some part of me that regrets unleashing Thomas's speech on the town.

I spend the first part of the morning with the children. Alison is catechising them, and invites me to observe their progress. Margaret has hers almost by heart. Each time she stumbles she pauses for a moment and closes her eyes, her face a mask of resolve, before starting again from the very beginning. Henry shuffles on his chair, impatient for his turn. When at last Alison turns to him he is rushed and careless, mixing up his answers.

'Dear me, Master Henry,' Alison says severely. 'You must do better than that. Here's your sister knows it back to front, and her two years younger than you.'

Henry glances over at me for a brief, imploring moment and tries again. 'My duty towards God is to believe in him, to fear him, and to love him with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength...' He frowns in puzzlement. I can imagine the questions he has. How can I love Him



who I must fear? How can I love Him with all my mind if I may not question his ways? But perhaps these are my questions, not his.

There's a knock on the nursery door, and Agnes comes in. 'Pardon me, Mistress, but the Master asks if you'll join him in the consulting room.'

I am glad to be released from the strictures of Alison's domain, but feel a niggle of anxiety as I descend the stair. Robert and I have been tiptoeing around each other since the night the gallows-guard called at the house.

Robert's consulting room was a place I rarely entered, and only ever at his invitation. It is his space, just as my little parlour is mine. The walls of the consulting room are lined with medical books – some few inherited from his father, but the bulk steadily acquired by Robert himself, from his student days onwards. He is behind his desk when I go in, but has placed a chair close to his so that I can sit alongside him. A letter and some other papers are spread out on the desk. 'I thought you were out,' I say.

He smiles weakly. 'My lady patients are enjoying good health today. I had few house calls.' He studies my face. 'And what about you, Isobel? How are your spirits?'

His solicitude is unexpected and gratifying. 'I feel a little numb. That will pass, I suppose. I'm not sure I want it to, for then I will feel my loss.'

'Do you feel able to discuss... practicalities?' He glances at the papers in front of him. 'I have a letter from your mother's advocate, with a copy of her will.'

'Oh, of course. What does the advocate say?'

'It's straightforward enough. There are a number of small bequests – to the servants, the children and so on. And your mother's jewels and gowns to you,

naturally. The house and land at Lauder are ours now. We must only decide what we wish to do with them.'

How delicate he is in his choice of words. The house and land are *ours*, he says. *We* must decide. The law sees things a little differently. Everything that belongs to me is his, to do with as he pleases, but in all our years of marriage he has never behaved as if that were the case. Flawed as he is, he always shows me that respect. The frost of the last few days begins to thaw.

We discuss our options. The idea of removing to Lauder appeals to me – I yearn for the countryside; miss the greens and duns of its fields and ditches. There is something in the constant scrutiny of Edinburgh society that oppresses me greatly, but Robert's work is in town, as Henry's schooling soon will be. I know any notions of retreating to my childhood home must be deferred. Robert accepts that the property will not be sold – his own father scrimped to become a householder, and he understands well that land and buildings signify more than mere financial worth. We agree to retain the agent who managed the land for my mother during her years of widowhood, and seek a tenant for the house. Robert is preparing to write to the advocate when there was rap at the consulting room door and Agnes comes in.

'There's a Miss Aikenhead come to see you, Mistress,' she says.

Robert frowns at the name. 'Why is she calling with you?' he says.

The fear that has stilled over the last half hour begins to flutter again. 'I don't know,' I say. My first thought is to speak to her privately in my parlour, but I recall the trust Robert has shown me this morning and ask Agnes to bring her into the consulting room. I stand up and smooth my skirts. Robert is looking at me quizzically, unsatisfied by my response. 'Now that I think of it, I wrote to

her offering my assistance,' I lie. 'Perhaps she needs help,' I say to Robert. 'Or money. It must be difficult for her, don't you think?'

'Be careful, Isobel. You know what that family is like.'

Agnes shows Katharine in to the room a moment after Robert finishes speaking. I cannot tell from her face if she heard his final words. She refuses a seat, so we both stand awkwardly.

'How are you, Miss Aikenhead?' I ask. 'This is my husband, Dr Carruth.'

She looks Robert over, but makes no direct response to my question. 'I declared I needed no help from you, and I meant it, but beggars can't be choosers, as the saying goes.' She gives a short, humourless laugh.

'We will assist you in whatever way we can.' As I speak, I sense Robert shift uneasily. 'What is it that you need?'

'Thomas's sentence deprived him of his property as well as his life, and I have been working these last days to overturn that part of his punishment at least.'

'If you need an advocate I'm sure my husband can recommend one.' I turn to Robert for confirmation, and he nods grudgingly.

Katharine gives that strange laugh again. 'Oh, I've got an advocate. You forget, Mistress Carruth, that my family has a long association with the law.'

'Well then...'

'Matters were proceeding steadily enough,' she interrupts, 'and then copies of this began appearing around the town.' She takes a folded sheet of paper from her skirt pocket and hands it to me.

I know before unfolding it what it is. Thomas's speech. I make a show of scanning it before handing it to Robert. 'Have you seen this?' I ask, working to keep the tremor from my voice.

'Yes,' he says curtly. I think of the original document, still hidden in my little desk upstairs like a secret sin.

'I wanted to know,' Katharine goes on, 'who are the friends who claim to have been entrusted with this speech?'

'Perhaps,' says Robert, 'some of those he knew at the university?'

'Those same who queued up to give evidence against him? I think not.'

My mouth is dry and I moisten my lips with my tongue before I speak. 'Are you not glad that Thomas's voice has been heard?'

Katharine stares at me as if I am deranged. 'Glad? I wish he had never been so rash as to open his mouth in the first place. All he had to do was stick to his studies, and become a doctor. We'd have been secure then. I could have kept house for him instead of trailing out to work behind the counter of a shop every day. And now this!' She points an accusatory finger at the paper. 'It has roused up the coffee house gossips all over again. My advocate advises me to delay now, until things have settled. I expect the Privy Council's bailiffs at my door any day, for our home was in Thomas's name. What am I to do then?'

I turn to Robert. He looks ill at ease, but he says, 'If it comes to that you must ask us for assistance until the matter is settled. A confiscation order can be overturned, even if it has been executed...' He stops, flustered by his unfortunate choice of word.

Katharine makes a dismissive movement with her hand, but does not reject Robert's offer outright. 'You do not know then, who is responsible for

circulating this speech of Thomas's?' she says, looking from me to Robert and back again. We both shake our heads. She gives me a final hard stare. 'In that case I will be on my way. But if you do happen to discover who it was, you can tell them from me that they have done me a disservice.' And with that she turns and leaves, not waiting to be shown out.

'Poor Miss Aikenhead,' I say into the silence that stretches between Robert and me.

'She left Thomas's speech behind,' he says, picking it up. 'Do you want to keep it?'

I take the paper from him. 'Why did you not tell me that you knew this was circulating?'

'I thought it would distress you. You have enough grief of your own to contend with.'

I consider how I would respond to this if I were guiltless, and try to match my actions to that other, innocent Isobel. 'You are thoughtful, Robert, but you must not shield me from the world. I am not a child.'

'I know that.'

I fold the paper into a tight square. My own words remind me that I have not yet told Henry and Margaret the truth about Thomas's absence. I persuade myself it is the prospect of that conversation that makes my heart heavy with dread.

## Mungo

Though the tempest rage and the mouth of the seas would devour me, the word of the Lord holds me fast. My spirit is strong – with the Lion of Judah’s help – but my mortal body is full of fears, and I have felt compelled to take refuge beyond the town, back where I began, in my mother’s house. These four walls embrace me like the love of God. The stair creaks. I hear the rattle of crockery on the tray as Mother bears my meal up to me. I stand, open the door, let her shuffle across the small distance to my desk. She sets the tray down on top of my papers.

‘Well?’ I say.

‘Nothing tae report,’ she says. She meets my eye for a moment. Long enough for me to see how she scrutinises me. *Was it for this he was reared?* her eyes say. *Is this my reward for his schooling?* And the most fearful question of all. *What now? What next?*

She goes, and the little house creaks its familiar tune as she descends. I clear my plate in a matter of minutes, and still my belly tightens and gurgles, demanding more.

I turn to my memoir. It is a sign of my strength that I did not let Thomas’s speech deflect me over-long. I made my rebuttal, and at this moment dear, faithful Patrick is having it set to print. I *will* have the last word. So now, think back, man. Try to understand what led you here. Tell the truth, if only to yourself.

*All men are a mixture of good and evil, virtue and vice, kindness and malice. It is often only as a friendship grows that we perceive the darker side of one*

*whom we first thought possessed of nothing but light. So it was with Thomas. What I at first took to be high spirits and genius I gradually came to see as a dangerous discontent. I decided to disentangle myself from his acquaintance, but he proved unwilling to be cast off. The Lord has seen fit to grant me a memorable appearance, and so I found it near impossible to evade Thomas by blending into the crowd at our lectures. I would make haste to be the first to leave when they ended, sometimes being compelled to hide in a doorway or anteroom until I was sure he had gone. One day, though, he caught me, and insisted on accompanying me back to my lodgings.*

*'I scarcely see you these days,' he complained. 'Why is that?'*

*I made some excuse about the demands of my studies and my scant budget.*

*'Katharine asks after you,' he continued. 'I believe she hoped you would be a good influence on me. And you have missed several invitations to dine with Dr and Mistress Carruth.'*

*'Patrick didn't say anything.'*

*Thomas shrugged. 'Oh I didn't bother taking him along. He's dull company, don't you think?'*

*'So you went alone?'*

*'Why not? The company is pleasant, the conversation stimulating and the food better than I'm used to.'*

*I thought of the three or four occasions I had been to the house on the Pleasance. It was true that Mistress Carruth provided a good dinner, but the mood in that house was like a musical instrument whose strings had been over-tightened. Thomas seemed oblivious to it, plucking blithely at the tension between the doctor and his wife.*

*We arrived at my lodgings and tried to go in by the shop door, but found it locked.*

*'That's odd,' said I. It was a foolish thing to say, for it piqued Thomas's curiosity, and any hopes I might have had of ridding myself of his company were undone. He followed me down the wynd to the yard door, and we came into the house through the back kitchen. The white dog was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the shop, growling softly, the hackles on the back of her neck raised. Her pup was at her heels, imitating his dam.*

*Thomas glanced over at me questioningly, but when he found no answer in my face he lifted the curtain in the doorway aside and strode into the shop. 'Good day, gentlemen,' I heard him say in his boldest voice. 'You have us quite mystified. Mungo!' he called, 'Come through and see this.'*

*Most reluctantly I did as he asked. There were three strangers in the shop, two of them lifting books off the shelves and out of cupboards. As each book was lifted and examined the title and author were read out loud, and the third stranger made notes in a pocket book. Hutchison stood in the midst of them, paler than usual and picking at the fraying cuff of his jacket.*

*The man with the pocket book looked Thomas and I over. 'And who might these be?' There was something cold in the way he appraised us. I felt like a child standing before the most merciless of schoolmasters.*

*'My tenant, Mungo Craig,' said Hutchison, 'and his friend, Thomas Aikenhead.'*

*I longed to say that he was not my friend, but good manners compelled me to stay silent.*



*'What's going on? said Thomas. 'Are you having an inventory taken, Hutchison? Thinking of selling up?'*

*'These gentlemen have been sent by the Privy Council,' Hutchison said, 'who very wisely are taking stock of all the booksellers in the burgh, to ensure there are no... unsuitable books for sale.'*

*'Unsuitable?' Thomas said. There was a bright, hectic gleam in his eye. 'What do you mean by unsuitable?'*

*The man with the pocket book stopped writing. 'We are rooting out works likely to encourage freethinking, atheism, deism and blasphemy. I regret to say we have found two such books in this establishment.' He gestured towards two books set apart from the others.*

*'I see,' said Thomas, his voice rising. 'So you mean to... castrate the bookshops in the same way you've already done the University library?'*

*I was anxious to remove myself from the situation as soon as I could, and began backing towards the door into the kitchen. 'I must go,' I said. 'I have a great deal of studying to do.' None of them responded, so I made my way quickly to my room. I sat on my bed, silently praying that Thomas would not follow me up. After a time I heard the back door bang and breathed a sigh of relief. An hour or so later the shop door scraped open. I guessed our visitors must be gone, and went back downstairs.*

*Hutchison was still in the shop, putting the books to rights. 'What will they do?' I said.*

*He shrugged. 'Nothing much. They confiscated the ones they didn't like the look of. I'd already got rid of the worst of them.'*

*'You knew they were coming?'*

*Hutchison gave me a wan smile. 'I have a friend or two in the Privy Council.'*

*A week or so later I was reading by Hutchison's kitchen window, with the dog and her pup for companions. The glass was thick with frost but I'd rubbed it away to let in a wee bit more light. My toes were warm, at least. I was close enough to the hearth to stretch out my legs and feel the benefit. The fire was the one reason I was there, and not upstairs in the peace of my bedroom. Hutchison was working in the shop, but he had a tendency to wander in and out of the back room. I longed for solitude – dear Lord how I longed for it! My mind was jumping and itching as if it were flea-ridden. I was badly behind with my studies.*

*The shop door scraped open. That noise set my teeth on edge. A familiar voice. Thomas. The white bitch and her pup raised their heads in unison. The pup leapt up and scurried out into the shop, setting the curtain that hung in the doorway between the kitchen and shop billowing. The creature gave a volley of excited yelps. Thomas laughed. 'Good day, my little friend,' he said, in that daft voice people save for pets and bairns. I stayed very still, afraid to move in case a floorboard creaked and betrayed me.*

*'I suppose you've come to call upon your big friend,' I heard Hutchison say.*

*'Aye. I couldn't find him at the library.'*

*'I've a notion he might have gone out.' Hutchison swished past the curtain and looked at me with an eyebrow raised. I shook my head. No. He turned towards the stairs and shouted, 'Mr Craig! Are you there? Mungo!' He held his hand up to me, the index finger pointed heavenward, as if to say, keep silence.*

*He walked back into the shop. 'Not a sign of him, Mr Aikenhead. I scarcely see him, these days.'*

*'That makes two of us, Mr Hutchison.'*

*'Does he owe you money?'*

*Thomas laughed. 'No,' he said. 'Not that.'*

*Patrick brought news of the arrest, blattering in through the shop door and shouting the news up the stairs to me at such a volume that half the neighbourhood must have heard him. I was lying in bed under the blankets in the hope of getting warm, and he put me in such a panic that I ran downstairs in my stocking soles.*

*'We were just coming out of Dalton's,' he said, still gasping for breath. 'A man approached, with a warrant in his hands, and two of the watch behind him to take hold of Thomas.'*

*Hutchison came in from the shop as Patrick spoke. 'What's the charge?' he said.*

*Patrick looked wildly at Hutchison then back at me. 'Blasphemy.'*

I hear the first knock on Mother's front door since I've been here. A murmur of conversation. I stay in my room. I don't want to be seen.

Mother's slow, uneven step on the stair. Her tentative tap on the door frame, there being no door in it, only a curtain. 'Come on ahead,' I say.

She shuffles in. 'There's a laddie here says he's your friend. Mr Middleton.'  
'Send him up, then.'

She looks around the room, eyes flitting from the threadbare bedcover to the black mould on the ceiling. 'I've no' emptied your chamber pot the day,' she says, wrinkling her nose, then glancing at me like an anxious servant in front of her master.

I sigh and stand up. Why is she always this way? It's as if she's paralysed by shame. 'Very well then, I'll see him downstairs.' She lets me go first, knowing I haven't the patience to follow her limping descent.

Patrick is standing by the fire, his face pinched with the cold. He has a package in his hands.

'You have them, then?' I say.

'Aye. You'd best unwrap them. My hands are too numb to undo the knot.'

I set the package on the table and unwrap it. The front page of my new pamphlet stares up at me: *A Lye is no Scandal, Or a Vindication of Mr Mungo Craig From a Ridiculous Calumny cast upon him by T. A. who was Executed for Apostacy At Edinburgh, the 8 of January, 1697.*

'Will it do?' Patrick asks. 'The quality of the print is not as good as the last one.'

'A rush job, I suppose. How much did you have to pay?'

'Thruppence a copy.'

'That's dearer than before, and for fewer pages.'

'The printer said it was because we only wanted fifty copies. The more you print the less it costs per pamphlet.' He shifts from foot to foot. 'When do you think you might be able to repay me, Mungo? I don't mean to press you...'

'Keep every penny you make from selling them until you have your money back. Is that fair?'

‘Aye, I suppose so.’ He looks unhappy. Patrick is not the world’s most natural hawker of pamphlets. Thomas would have been better fitted for the job.

## Isobel

‘Henry, my darling, I have something I must tell you about Thomas. It is something very sad, and you must try to be brave.’

He looks up at me, his eyes sombre. ‘Is he dead?’

His stark question throws me for a moment, but it deserves a frank reply.

‘Yes,’ I say simply.

Henry turns away, staring out of the parlour window. ‘What did he die of?’

I silently run over the words I have rehearsed. The truth, but a version of it fit for a sweet-natured boy. ‘I’m afraid that Thomas got into trouble with the law, and he was hanged for it.’

‘Did he do something very bad?’

‘He said that he did not believe in God.’

Henry looks back at me, frowning in puzzlement. ‘But that’s silly. How could he not believe in God?’

For a moment I feel giddy with relief. ‘I know, my darling. It was very foolish of him to think it, still less to say so.’ I feel the tiniest pang, quickly suppressed, that Henry has accepted the teachings of the church without question. He is safe, that is what matters. Untainted by doubt.

‘Poor Thomas,’ he says. Then, ‘May I go now, Mother?’

‘Yes, of course.’ For some odd reason I am disappointed. I expected tears, even prostration, had prepared myself to soothe his broken heart with kisses and caresses. ‘I have not told Margaret this news,’ I say to him.

‘Why not?’

‘Because you are the eldest, and a boy, and so you had to be told first.’

He absorbs this idea, and appears pleased by it. 'Shall I send her down to you now?'

'Not yet, my love. There'll be time enough to tell her later.' I savour this private triumph over my daughter, and wonder at what sort of mother I am to enjoy it so.

I walk along the Grassmarket in such a state of preoccupation that I do not see Dr Maxwell until I almost collide with him. He steadies me by taking hold of my arm. 'Well, well, Isobel' he says, scrutinising my face with a smile on his. 'Is your head turned by the stir your handiwork has caused?'

'I hardly think our few copies of Thomas's speech have caused a great commotion in the town,' I say. I make no mention of Katharine or her angry response.

Dr Maxwell regards me steadily. 'So you haven't seen Mungo's response then?' When I shake my head he continues. 'He has published another pamphlet.'

'What does he say? Do you have a copy?'

'I do. It is tucked away in my consulting room. Here, my house is only a step away.'

As he leads me to his home – one of the better old houses on the Grassmarket – I belatedly realise that this is the first time he has called me by my Christian name. Until now only three people in the world have called me *Isobel*, just *Isobel*. My mother, my father, and my husband. Those three have some claim to ownership of me: my father sired me; my mother grew me in her womb; and my husband is the sole possessor of my body. And now Dr Maxwell

has claimed that same intimacy. Perhaps he thinks it is his right, after the favour he has done me in disseminating Thomas's speech. I should be offended by his presumption but I am not.

Dr Maxwell's housekeeper appears almost the moment that we enter the house. 'Ah, Missus Copeland,' Dr Maxwell says, 'Dr Carruth's wife has taken a dizzy turn. Let's help her in to my consulting room.' The lie glides from his lips with ease.

The old woman tucks her hand under my elbow and guides me in through the first doorway we come to. The room is no larger than Robert's consulting room, but the furnishings are older and more distinguished. Missus Copeland settles me in an upholstered chair. 'Shall I make you a posset, madam?' she asks me.

'I believe a glass of Rumney wine might be more the thing,' Dr Maxwell says, before I have the chance to reply. 'And do you have any sweet thing hidden in the pantry?'

'There's a nice bit of boiled cake, sir.'

'That will do very well.'

When she leaves us, Dr Maxwell goes to his desk and leafs through a sheaf of papers until he finds what he is looking for. He pulls up a seat close to mine and hands me the pamphlet. 'Take your time,' he says. 'The print is badly smudged in places.'

'It must have been a rushed job,' I reply and begin reading. The housekeeper returns with a decanter of wine and a plate of cake. I accept a glass from Dr Maxwell as I read on. At first I feel angry with Mungo, and irritated by his pompous way of arguing his defence, but as I read on I am troubled by a



growing sense of unease. He utterly rejects Thomas's accusation against him with every appearance of sincerity. He cannot comprehend how Thomas could die with a lie on his lips, and what distresses him more is that so many in the town believe it. For the first time I wonder if Thomas's words *had* been lies. When I look up from the pamphlet I see that Dr Maxwell is regarding me with interest.

'You have the most intriguing face,' he says. 'Watching you just now I could see how your thoughts brightened and darkened, and yet I would not hazard a guess as to what those thoughts might be.'

'What do you make of the pamphlet?' I say, ignoring his gallantry.

He turns away with a slight smile, like a gambler accepting a loss with good grace. 'I think he's frightened.'

'Is it possible he's innocent?'

'Innocent of informing against Thomas? I cannot say. But innocent of freethinking? Yes, that would be my guess.'

'If that is true then I have done him an injustice.'

He takes the pamphlet back from me and returns it to his desk. 'Young Mr Craig seems well able to defend himself.'

'I'm not sure that he is. Yes, of course, he has responded through his pamphlet, but he has no connections, no wealth to secure him if the Privy Council come seeking another scapegoat.'

Dr Maxwell looks as if he is wearying of the subject. 'There's nothing to be done now.'

I stand up, infected by Dr Maxwell's restiveness. 'If I could speak to him, ask him directly, I would be better able to judge whether or not I have done him wrong.'

'Is he still in Edinburgh?'

'His landlord said not, but I could not tell if he was lying. I should go and enquire again.' I remember Hutchison's reaction to me on my last visit. 'Dr Maxwell,' I say, 'would you be kind enough to accompany me to Mungo's lodgings? His landlord is an uncouth fellow, and was most uncivil to me when I called there before.'

'Was he now?' says Dr Maxwell. 'Then of course you must permit me to be your knight.' His words are as empty as his smile. I sense that he is tired of this – how fickle he is! – and only his sense of courtesy compels him to accede to my request.

Once again I stand in Robert Hutchison's shop, in spite of the threats he'd made at my last visit. He takes a moment to recognise me, and when he does he says, 'Ah, it's you, is it?'

Dr Maxwell is by my side, and I am aware of how much stronger a lady's argument is when she is accompanied by a gentleman – any gentleman. 'I imagine you can guess what brings me here?' I say.

There is one elderly customer stooped over a volume bound in red calfskin. He turns a page with much licking of his fingers and riffling of paper. Hutchison walks over to him and tucks a hand under the old man's arm. 'I have some business to attend to, sir, and must ask for privacy,' he says. 'Would you like me to hold this book over for you?' The customer appears not to hear this

offer, and Hutchison is obliged to repeat it several times, at ever increasing volume. Eventually the old man is persuaded from the shop. Hutchison locks the door and turns to face us. 'I suppose you think I had Mungo's latest pamphlet printed?'

'Did you not?'

Hutchison didn't reply for a moment, and then says, 'You may come through to the back. It's warmer there.'

I wonder at his sudden concern for my comfort.

He holds the curtain aside to let Dr Maxwell and I walk through an ill-lit corridor that leads to a small back room. A decent fire burns in the grate, and the white dog lies sprawled in front of it. I see now that she is in pup, her teats congested and her belly swollen. She looks up sleepily to see who is in her domain, and although her eyes shift from face to face she gives neither sign nor sound of menace.

Hutchison gestures for me to sit in the chair, and pulls up a stool for Dr Maxwell. He perches himself on a crate that serves as a table of sorts. 'Young Aikenhead wasn't a bad young gulpin,' he says, staring into the fire. 'Used to make me poultices for my sores.' He scratches at his face, although it is free of chancres for the moment. 'Heated them in that very grate.' For a moment I imagine I can smell the acrid after-scent of a mercury poultice. Hutchison looks over at Dr Maxwell. 'They say a hot poultice is the best thing for drawing the badness out of a sore, don't they?'

Dr Maxwell nods his assent, and glances over at me with a glint in his eye. Hutchison must assume that Dr Maxwell is my husband.

‘So,’ I say, ‘am I to take it that Mungo Craig did not come to you with his latest enterprise?’

‘No.’ Hutchison’s face darkened. ‘Did you note how shoddy this new pamphlet is? Sure the numbers are all out of kilter. It’s badly done, and half the town think it’s me who made it. This will damage me, so it will, and times are hard enough.’

‘When last we spoke I was angry. With Mungo and with you.’ I pause. ‘Since reading this second pamphlet of his I am less certain of my view.’

‘Not so confident that your indignation is righteous?’ Hutchinson says with a sly look.

I nod. ‘I would like to speak to Mungo and make a proper judgement. If he has suffered from a calumny I must help make amends.’

‘If I knew where he was, I’d tell you as readily as may be.’

My heart sinks at this. ‘So you truly don’t know where he’s staying?’

Hutchison shakes his head. ‘I mind him saying as how his old mother lives out in Leith. He could be lying low there.’

I catch Dr Maxwell’s eye. He speaks for the first time. ‘Tell me, Mr Hutchison,’ he says in the casual tone I have come to recognise, ‘do you print many pamphlets?’

‘Just the odd one.’

‘So you don’t have a press here?’

‘No.’ Hutchison sounds guarded. He is not fooled by Dr Maxwell’s smoothness. Perhaps he is wiser than I’d suspected. The dog begins to growl very softly although she still lies basking in front of the fire. I look down at her and see her belly distend as one of her unborn pups stirs inside her.

‘I suppose you must have paid a Scot’s pound or two to have Mungo’s first pamphlet printed?’

‘I’ve yet to meet a printer who’ll work for nothing.’

‘Aye, indeed. Which printer did you use? It was a pretty enough piece, one any printer would be proud to put his name to, unlike this latest issue.’ When Hutchison says nothing Dr Maxwell smiles over at me. ‘Shall we go, my dear? I’m sure Mr Hutchison wants to be attending to his business.’

We all stand and Hutchison escorts us out through the shop. Dr Maxwell hesitates at the door. ‘Did you fund the printing yourself, Mr Hutchison?’

Once again Hutchison does not reply. His face is set like a mask. He pulls open the door – still warped and scraping along the floor – and waits for us to leave without giving an answer.

We walk far enough away from the head of College Wynd to be out of Hutchison’s view, and stop to face each other. ‘What was the purpose of your questions?’ I ask.

Dr Maxwell looks thoughtful. ‘Who do you conclude was the inciting genius behind Mungo’s first pamphlet?’

‘I had not given it much thought. Mungo, I assumed. Must it not have been Mungo’s idea? Fanned on by Hutchison, who guessed there would be an appetite for it.’

‘I don’t know. Hutchison doesn’t strike me as a man over-afflicted with enterprise. Give him a commission and he’ll carry it out, but that’s about the height of his talents. And it’s clear from his silence that he didn’t put up the money to have the pamphlet printed.’

'Mungo has nothing, I suppose. He depends on a charitable bursary, I believe.'

Dr Maxwell raises his eyebrows at this. 'Is that so? In which case, who paid the costs of the printing? And why?'

I understand him now. 'You think some other party put him up to it?'

'It seems likely, don't you think? If you could find out who funded the pamphlet you would know who was truly responsible for Thomas's death.'

'The only person who might tell us who paid for the pamphlet is Mungo himself.'

'We could make a trip to Leith to continue our investigation some fine day.' He smiles. 'Travel incognito in a hired coach. You swathed in black veils and me with my hat pulled down low and my muffler burred round my face.'

This is no more than a game to him. 'If I go to Leith I will go openly,' I say. 'I have nothing to hide.'

'Your husband might wonder at it.'

I consider this for a moment. What will Robert say if he hears of such a visit? I can honestly tell him of my concerns for Mungo, but not of my role in them. Surely his tolerance will not be infinite. 'I must go now, Dr Maxwell. I have been away from home too long.' I feel heavy with dread at the thought of returning there.

Dr Maxwell scrutinises my face. 'If you took another dose of the head-staggers I'd have a respectable excuse to escort you to my consulting room again.' A faint smile plays on his lips.

I shake my head. 'I would like more than anything to avoid the companionship my own house offers me, but I cannot run away from it.' I speak

more frankly than I intend and am aware of a slight withdrawal in Dr Maxwell's manner. It is so infinitesimal as to be scarcely noticeable. I sense it rather than see it.

‘I'll bid you good day then, Mistress Carruth,’ he says, bowing just as a gentleman should, before he turns and walks away from me up Peebles Wynd towards the High Street with swift, determined strides.

I am near enough at Cowgate Port when I hear footsteps behind me, and hurry out towards the crossroads where there will be more people about. There is something about the Cowgate that makes my nerves jangle. The dark mouths of so many wynds open onto it. I cannot bear them, and never enter one if I see there is someone else in it. The narrowness of the way, and the great looming walls on either side nearly take the breath from my body, although I know they are often the fastest way to traverse the city. I turn to see who has come after me. It is Patrick Middleton, one of Thomas's circle. I have not seen him for over two months – not since before Thomas's arrest.

‘Mistress Carruth,’ he says. He smooths his hair, conscious, perhaps, that he has come outside without a hat on his head.

‘Were you in the house just now when I was talking to your landlord?’ When he nods I continue, ‘I suppose you heard our conversation?’

‘Enough to get the gist.’ He eyes me anxiously.

I realise that I do not harbour the same fury towards him as I do – as I once did - to Mungo. Instead I feel a kind of puzzled sadness. ‘What did Thomas ever do to you that made you all so eager to turn against him?’

Patrick sighs and leans against the wall. He looks terribly young, barely older than my Henry. Perhaps that partly explains why my ill feeling towards him is so much less. Mungo is as full-grown as any man in his prime, whereas Patrick still has the slight build of boyhood, as Thomas had. 'We had no choice, Mistress Carruth. All those things we told of before the Privy Council, they were true sayings of Thomas. We all heard him speak them, so how could I say otherwise? I'd taken an oath to tell the truth. Should I have lied before God in order to save Thomas from trouble?'

'Tell me this, Patrick. How did the good men of the Privy Council come to know of Thomas's ill speaking in the first place? Did you tell them?'

He shakes his head vehemently. 'Not I, Mistress Carruth.'

'Who then? Mungo?'

'I asked him that myself. He denies it.'

'So it was the birds in the trees went and sang it in the Lord Chancellor's ear?'

'At first I thought – you'll think my head's cracked – but I thought Thomas himself had passed the word to the Privy Council.'

'Thomas? That's ridiculous.'

'Aye, I know that, but Thomas liked nothing better than to be the centre of attention.'

'Even to the extent of imperilling his life? I hardly think it. Does it not seem more probable that it was Hutchison? He's a sleekit sort of fellow, and he likely hoped to profit from Mungo's cursed pamphlet.'

'I don't know.'

'I should like to speak to Mungo. Do you know where he has gone?'



Patrick shakes his head. 'I rose up one morning and found he had flitted.'

'If you find out where he is, will you send me word?'

'I... I cannot say that I will.' At this moment a group of countrymen jostle past us, and Patrick flinches, backing into a doorway. It is harder to read his expression without the daylight on his face.

'Why ever not? What reason have you to deny me that?'

'Can you not just let things lie? It might be better for all of us.'

'Is that why you came after me?'

He doesn't answer me at first, but steps backwards further into the shadows of the wynd. 'We none of us can undo what's done, Mistress Carruth,' he says, then turns and walks back up towards his lodgings.

## Mungo

I write to anyone I am acquainted with who is in possession of respectability and good standing. They are sadly few. I have no influence. No connections.

*Dear Dr Row.* No, he is ill-disposed towards me. *Dear Reverend Crawford.*

Should he not help me? I sat often enough in his pews. *Dear Dr Carruth.* I detected something in him... a certain sympathy. I send the letters out, with a copy of my pamphlet enclosed, and receive no reply.

Patrick tells me the town is quiet. There have been no more arrests. In spite of his reassurance I am tortured by fear. Waking or sleeping it thrums through my body and mind. I think I must leave Scotland, if only to save my sanity. Here I sit, with scarce a bawbee to my name, living off my mother's meagre earnings. Hutchison has half my bursary in advance of rent prepaid until Whitsun, and refuses to refund me. Patrick says he has not yet recouped the cost of printing the pamphlet. I try to think of ways I might make a living.

I force myself to leave the house, for fear that if I do not I might never step over the door again. I walk to the Shore, where my father once earned his keep. The windmill is silent in the still, clear air, and there are a few boats moored, slumbering in the water. In these quiet hours, with no cries to be heard but those of sea birds, it is hard to imagine the bustle and turmoil when a boat docks. Then the whole port is black with men swarming in and out of the boat's hold, passing bales of linen, bushels of grain and all the other goods arriving from England and beyond to feed and clothe our citizens. Perhaps I would be better coming here at a busier time when I might be less conspicuous. The quay is almost deserted, save for a few dishevelled looking fellows who seem to be loitering in hopes of employment. My coat is cheap, but its cut still marks me

out as something more than a labouring man, and I am uncomfortable under their gaze as I pass them. I walk on to the end of the quay, determined that they will not deter me in my exercise. There is a small wooden building at the end of the quay, with the door lying open. I can see a figure moving about inside in the deliberate manner of a man with work to be done. As I draw closer he notices me, and steps into the doorway. He looks me up and down with a sharp eye.

‘You’re a bit late in the day to be looking for work,’ he says.

I feel affronted that he takes me for one such as the men I passed. I straighten my stance and adjust the buttons on my coat, to draw his attention to my respectable attire. ‘You mistake my purpose, sir. I am a student from the University, in search of nothing more than a breath of sea air.’

He inspects me again. ‘Aye, right enough,’ he says. ‘You’ve a dockman’s shoulders but a scholar’s hands. No good to me.’

‘How is trade?’ I ask, remembering this is a favoured subject for those who worked the Shore.

He shakes his head. ‘Poor enough. The only goods we send out into the world are wool and soldiers. There’s always a market for soldiers, but little enough demand for good Scottish wool these days.’ He takes a pipe from his coat and pats his pockets in search – I presume – of tobacco. Finding none he replaces the pipe.

For a brief moment I entertain the idea of joining one of the regiments, but dismiss it at once. Without money or friends to secure me a commission I would have to be a common soldier, and I could not endure that. ‘When will these boats sail?’ I ask, looking over at them.

'On the evening tide. The *Anne Maria* and the *Whiffler* are bound for Hull, and the *Minora* for Flanders. Are you after a passage?'

'No, no, I asked only to make conversation.'

'Aye. If you'll take my advice, a young man such as yourself should set his sights on America. They've got towns as big as Edinburgh now.'

I bid him goodbye and retrace my steps, past the ne'er-do-wells, past the boats whose names promised more beauty than their appearance merited. America. It is a madness of an idea, and utterly beyond my means, but just the idea of it disturbs me. A place far away, beyond the sea, with Edinburgh and all within it left far behind. A fresh start. My unsettled mind quickly darkens into despair at the impossibility of escape. I hurry home to seek peace in my writing, in hope that the scratch of pen on paper will calm me once more.

*We visited Thomas in prison, of course. 'I know what they want,' he said, looking about the crowded cell to make sure he was heard by the other miserable souls who were detained with him. 'Another penitent to parade around the Kirks in sackcloth and ashes. Well they won't get it, not from me.'*

*There was no persuading him. Patrick tried but the more he urged Thomas to a show of repentance, the more stubbornly he resisted.*

*As we were leaving he let Patrick go on ahead and held me back. 'You should make up one of your rhymes about this, Mungo,' he said. 'Have it printed and sold and use the funds to pay for my advocate. What do you say?'*

*'This is no time for jokes, Thomas. You are in a perilous situation. We all are.'*

*My cautionary words only emboldened him. 'All the better reason to take full advantage. We'll never again be the makers of news.' His eyes glowed with passion, like an overexcited child's. 'I'll wager the whole town is agog to know more about me, and you'd be the very man to supply their need. Come, Mungo, say you'll do it. Ask Hutchison to have it printed up.' And as it was in the first days of our friendship I found myself unable to refuse him. I ventured a last, practical obstruction. 'But how am I to pay for it? Hutchison's credit is not good. Any printer will want his money in advance.'*

*He fell back, hesitant for a moment. 'Leave that with me, my dear Mungo.'* He glanced over at one of his cellmates – a fierce, ill-favoured ruffian with a black beard that seemed to sprout near enough all the way up to his eyes. The villain grinned at us, and Thomas smiled back at him. *'I will consult with my mentor here. He's an ingenious chap.' He slapped me heartily on the back. 'Press ahead, Mungo. Put your pen to work, and turn my woes to gold.'*

*'How was he?' Hutchison said when we were back at our lodgings.*

*'Poor Thomas,' said Patrick. 'They have him in a mean, dark cell with half a dozen others.'*

*Hutchison touched the shiny pink skin where his canker used to be before Thomas cured it. 'That will knock the spark out of him.'*

*'I wouldn't be so sure,' I said. 'He seemed to be revelling in it.'*

*'Shame on you, Mungo,' said Patrick, blinking like a broken-hearted calf. 'He's full of fear.'*

*'He'll enjoy the trial,' I said. 'Centre of attention.'*

*'When is it to be?' said Hutchison.*

*'Before Christmas.'*

*'And none to speak for him?'*

*Patrick crouched down in front of the fire to pet the white bitch and her pup. She snarled at him, and he withdrew his hand. 'I thought Dr Carruth might know how to advise us, but when I called at his house I found the whole family removed. Mistress Carruth's mother is three-quarter's way through death's door, according to the neighbour. They're away to Lanarkshire to be with her until she steps over the threshold entirely.'*

*'You didn't tell me you were going to call at the Pleasance,' I said.*

*He looked up at me. 'Did I not?'*

*'No, you didn't.' I was embarrassed by the petulance in my voice.*

*Hutchison asked the question I dared not pose. 'I wonder what made them light on Thomas.' He glanced at us both in turn.*

*There was a long silence.*

*Hutchison spoke again. 'You lads shouldn't be rushing back to visit him,' he said. 'Guilt by association, and all that.'*

*'We'd be poor friends if we turned our back on him now,' said Patrick stoutly.*

*Neither Hutchison nor I responded.*

*The men who came for me stood out in the throng of students. They had stopped one of the porters, and he pointed in my direction. I watched as they walked towards me. No men of the watch in their company. My guts clenched. Their faces looked sharp-edged and clear, as if I was studying them through eyeglasses.*

*I told them nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary. I answered their questions. Said I had seen little of Thomas these last months. More of a casual acquaintance than a friend. There is no sin in speaking the truth.*

*Yes, it's inked on my memory. Hutchison reading the manuscript for my first pamphlet, squinting at my handwriting. The white bitch and her pup sprawled by the hearth. A fire was burning there, but it did little to warm the room. The winter had been as damp and chill as any I've known.*

*He turned to the last page, read through it, looked up at me. 'Are you sure about this?'*

*'Thomas told me to do it. It was his suggestion.' Yes indeed. How were either of us to know that the story would change in the writing. It was as if my pen, once charged with ink, could not be contained. The rhymes tumbled forth, and the firm iambic beat battered in time with my heart. Thomas was merely the spark that lit the fire of my invention.*

*The pup stood and stretched. It was nearly as big as its mother now. It padded over to the back door and scratched at the floor. Hutchison handed the manuscript back to me and let the dog out into the close. He came back to me and took the pages once more. 'Very well then.'*

*'How much will it cost? How much will it make?'*

*'I've a printer will run off a hundred at tuppence a piece. We'll need to sell them for sixpence.'*

*'So, four pounds profit?'*

*Hutchison twisted his mouth into a smile. 'You're assuming they'll all be sold.'*

*'Won't they?'*

*'Likely not.'*

*'But anyway, we'll make some profit?'*

*Hutchison nodded. 'And split it two ways.'*

*'But it's my work!'*

*'And my efforts to bring it to print.' His mouth twisted again. 'You're quite free to go elsewhere, Mr Craig. Don't feel obliged to deal with me simply because I am your landlord.'*

*Two days later. My words, made real by a printing press. My name, on the cover. Thomas's too, of course. But he was not the author. He was merely the subject, not the progenitor.*

*'Well?' said Hutchison. 'Are you happy now?'*



## Isobel

The keyman of the Tolbooth prison has a peculiar walk, tilting from side to side as he moves along the corridor so that his coat-tail swings like a hussy's skirt. The bunch of keys chime with each step he takes. We pass a number of closed doors with several names chalked on the bare wood. At length we stop. This door is different from the others, in that there is an oblong of slate attached to it by means of a frame. The name *Frazer* is scratched on the slate. 'Have you a wee handkerchief, Missus?' he says. 'The ladies sometimes like to cover their noses, you ken? Although it's no' sae bad being as it's winter.'

I have no fears of being overcome by the noxious stench of a gaol cell. However, I know what is expected of me in my role as gentlewoman-visitor to the Tolbooth. 'I have a handkerchief, thank you, and it's well scented with lavender oil.'

'Very prudent, Missus.' The keyman unhooks the bunch of keys from his belt and unlocks the door. 'Here's a visitor for you, Frazer,' he calls in. 'A lady.' There is a sound of movement from within the cell, but the keyman stands in the doorway, blocking my view. He looks back over his shoulder at me, smirking. 'Mister Frazer has a habit of falling to his knees when a visitor comes. He thinks it makes a good impression.' With that he stands aside to let me in. 'You may have ten minutes with him, if you can thole it that long.'

The light in the corridor is dim and I expect to find the cell similarly gloomy, but there is a fair-sized window, albeit set so high in the wall that it must be impossible for even the tallest man to see out of. Frazer stands beside a narrow pallet with a blanket spread across it, which I guess must serve as a bed by night

as well as a seat by day. His face has the pallor that comes with two seasons of incarceration and his eyes seem ill-focused, his gaze shifting from my face to my basket to the floor and then back again. It is as if he were afraid of looking at any one thing for more than a few seconds.

‘My name is Isobel Carruth,’ I say. ‘I wonder if I might speak to you.’

Frazer nods, then points towards the pallet. ‘Will you sit down, Mistress Carruth?’

Neither pallet nor blanket look particularly clean, but I feel awkward standing, and my legs are weary after climbing all those stairs. I sit at one end of the pallet, and motion for Frazer to sit also. He hesitates for a moment then sits down at the other end, as far away from me as he can manage without tumbling off.

‘I have brought you some food,’ I say, taking the package Hetty had prepared from my basket. ‘There’s half a loaf, and some cheese. A slice of dried tongue too.’

‘God bless you, Mistress Carruth,’ he says, his eyes fixed now on the package. He does not look too badly starved, but I imagine he’ll be glad enough of something tastier than prison rations.

‘I should explain why I am here.’

He looks up at me, a wary expression on his face. ‘I assumed this was an act of Christian charity.’

For some reason my face grows warm, and I know I must be blushing. ‘Of course. The book of Hebrews tells us to remember them that are in bonds. But I confess I have another reason. I had a young friend who is lately dead. Thomas Aikenhead.’

Frazer becomes very still. 'What of him?'

'I am trying to understand why it was he ended as he did. You survived, but he did not. Why were our judges so determined to destroy him?'

Frazer stands up and walks to the far corner of the cell. 'When I was sentenced to do penance around the churches of the town, it was meant to deter the likes of young Master Aikenhead from his freethinking. Would that it had. Did you ever see me paraded to the front of your Kirk in my sackcloth and ashes?'

'Yes. Sunday just past.'

Frazer nods. 'What did you think of the spectacle?'

'I was... ashamed.'

Frazer's expression softens, and for a moment I fear he might weep. 'Don't show me kindness, Mistress Carruth. I do not think I could bear it.' He rubs his nose on his sleeve and pulls himself together. 'Every Sunday since last August I have been stripped of my clothes and dressed in sackcloth. The keyman and his friends bring in the ashes from their hearth and toss them over my head. They like to jest that they are powdering my wig. Then I am marched barefoot to whichever Kirk is designated for that day's performance. Would such a display not be sufficient to encourage any young freethinker to discretion?'

'I don't know if Thomas ever saw you do penance.'

'Oh, he did. I heard it from his friend.'

I feel a chill in my heart, but force myself to ask, 'Which friend?'

Frazer knots his brows together. 'I do not think I can recall his name. A large-framed young fellow. Dark hair that was in need of a comb. He lectured me at length about repentance. That was *his* act of Christian charity.'

Mungo, without a doubt. 'When did he visit you?'

Frazer gives a hoarse laugh. 'That I could not tell you. The weeks seem to run in to each other. It may have been a long time ago.'

'Before Thomas's trial? Or before his arrest, even?'

'I do not know.'

I wonder when Thomas might have seen Frazer do public penance, and try to imagine how he would have responded. Knowing Thomas, the spectacle might have provoked rather than subdued him.

Frazer comes and sits down again, slumping against the wall as if he is exhausted.

'Have you no word of when you might be released?' I say.

He shakes his head. 'I petitioned to be allowed out after Christmas in order to prepare my master's account books, but their lordships would not hear of it. I don't know how I can prove to them that my repentance is sincere.'

'We live in a world where piety must be made a show of, as much as penance,' I say.

Frazer looks at me intently. 'But do you not think, Mistress Carruth, that the most sincere believer may be the one that bears his faith in the quiet depths of his heart?'

'The world seems to like evidence.'

'I make my best efforts to provide that. Divine service as often as they will allow. The reading of worthy literature,' - here he points at a small pile of books set on a low shelf - 'to say nothing of loud prayer when I hear footsteps in the corridor.' He leans forward and rests his head in his hands.

‘And what about in the quiet depths of your heart?’ I say softly. He looks up at me with anguish, and I know then that he is still tortured by doubt. The rigour of the law has quelled his outward acts, but it cannot silence the questions of his mind.

There is a sharp rap at the door and the keyman calls in some incomprehensible words, which I take to mean it is time for me to leave. I stand up, and take a few coins from my basket. ‘Will you accept this?’ I say, reaching them to Frazer. ‘They may buy you some small comforts when the food is gone.’

He steps forward and takes the money. ‘I wish with all my heart that the lad had learnt from my lesson.’

‘So do we all. I will pray that the Privy Councillors release you soon.’

He nods glumly at this. The door is opened, and the keyman leads me out, locking the door again behind him. ‘Well, Missus,’ he says, as he escorts me along the corridor towards the outside world, ‘how did you find him?’

‘Full of sincere repentance,’ I say, in as pious a voice as I can muster.

‘God be praised for that,’ the keyman says casually.

‘Yes indeed,’ I agree. ‘God be praised.’ As I say the words I know, absolutely, that I no longer believe them. The words in Thomas’s paper – copied out again and again – have found an answering echo in my own mind. All my life I have prayed to, and praised, and implored this God. I read my Bible daily, and agonise over its arguments and instructions. And now I realise it has all been for nothing. My passions and hopes have been directed at a chimera. *The more I thought thereon, Thomas wrote, the further I was from finding the verity I desired.* I have found verity now.

I step out of the Tolbooth into the High Street. After the gloom of the prison there is a Damascene brightness to the day. Yes, that makes sense. I have seen the light. But what to do when all those around me are still in darkness? And when the prisons and the gallows are at the disposal of those who will do anything to preserve it?

Robert's face is tight with anger. He tosses the paper – the original of Thomas's paper - down on the table in front of me. 'What is the meaning of this, Isobel?'

'I do not understand you.'

'It was in your desk, hidden away in a drawer. You cannot deny it. Am I to assume that you are behind those copies that have been circulated around the town?'

I take a deep breath to steady myself. 'Have you taken to searching my desk, Robert?'

The question stalls him for a moment. He lowers his eyes, and his mouth works as if he is practising how to respond. 'I would never do that,' he says at last.

'But somehow it has come into your possession.' I keep my voice calm, but my mind is in turmoil as I try to deduce who found it and passed it on to Robert. Hetty or Agnes? I think not. Surely not Alison? I quail at what she might do with such knowledge. 'Margaret,' I say out loud. The expression on Robert's face tells me I guess rightly. Yes, of course. She was in the room when Dr Maxwell called and saw me take the papers back to the desk. I feel as if a sliver of ice is piercing my heart. 'To think how much I longed for a daughter,' I say.

Robert stares at me as if he does not recognise me, then walks over to the window and looks out. I watch him - his straight back, and shoulders rather too narrow for a man. It is an insufficiency he disguises from the world with the assistance of his tailor. For a moment I am consumed with an almost unbearable pity for him. Even the fine wool fabric of his jacket makes me feel sad. What is it about our garments that seem so infused with grief?

At last he turns round to look at me. 'What were you thinking of, Isobel? What was your object in this enterprise?'

'It was Thomas's wish that his words were circulated. He has no other friend than me to carry out his wishes.'

Robert covers his eyes with his hand. 'You have stirred up a rats' nest.'

'Is your head aching?'

He nods. 'Of course.'

'You are angry with me.'

He says nothing, but returns from the window and sits down close to me. 'If it became known that you were responsible for this, that would be a bad thing for us.'

'Have I broken some law?'

'No, but...' He shifts impatiently in his chair. 'You've made it clear where your loyalties lie.'

'I have fulfilled the last wish of a dying man, and I cannot regret that, but - ' I take a deep breath. 'Mungo's second pamphlet has thrown my thoughts into disarray. He seems as sincere as Thomas. One of them has lied, and I do not know which.'

Robert ponders this for a moment. 'Who helped you?' he says, his voice hoarse with some new emotion. 'I trust you did not traipse around the coffee houses of Edinburgh distributing these papers yourself?'

I feel a tremor of anxiety. 'Dr Maxwell assisted me with the task,' I say as lightly as I can.

Robert exhales with a hiss, and shakes his head. 'That was... naive of you.'

'I think I can trust him to be discreet.' Robert opens his mouth to object but I cut him off, saying, 'I am as aware of his moral failings as you are, but tell me this: in all the years you have known him, has he ever revealed any secret to you?'

Robert stares at me, almost as if he is afraid of what I might say next. 'He... hints at many things.'

'Precisely. He hints. He teases. But he never tells, does he?'

Robert stands again. It seems he cannot stay still. 'Isobel,' he says, not looking at me, 'I forbid you to do anything more in relation to Mungo Craig. All this...' he waves his hand at the paper, 'must cease.' He hesitates, and when he speaks again there is the slightest tremor in his voice. 'I am not a tyrant, Isobel. I hope I have never behaved to you as if you were my subordinate, but in this matter I must ask... must demand that you obey me.'

I bow my head. 'Very well,' I say.

Robert coughs, brushes at a smudge of powder on his coat, and begins to stalk towards the door. Before he opens it he turns back to me. 'You think you know Maxwell,' he says. 'Believe me when I say, Isobel, you do not. He has one face in the company of women, and a very different one in the company of men.'



But which is the true face? I think.

‘I have asked you to desist from these current actions,’ Robert goes on.

‘Please know that it is not my intention to curtail your freedom. I will not... follow you... spy on you.’ A blotchy flush spreads across his face. ‘I trust you.’

A sharp stab of guilt at these words brings tears to my eyes and I turn away to find a handkerchief. Robert walks quickly back across the room and embraces me with a tenderness that compounds my distress. I rest my head against his chest and weep, for I have already made up my mind that I will betray his trust.

The next day I busy myself with the children, and interfere too much in the running of the kitchen. Robert absents himself visiting his patients, and when he comes home remains ensconced in his consulting room. In this way we contrive to avoid spending more than a half hour in each other’s company.

The following morning I venture out on some unnecessary errands. I have half a hope that I will encounter Mungo. Once I think I see him step into a close, but when I follow I am embarrassed to find it is not he, but only an older man with a similar build.

I arrive back at the house and find two sedan chairs, complete with four bearers, waiting on the roadway outside our door. The bearers are all men of the same short, wiry build. Three are standing, but a fourth is lounging on the doorstep, and as he sees my approach he rises in a leisurely fashion and waves me up through the doorway as if he is the owner of the property.

Inside the hallway I note two gentlemen’s cloaks and hats hanging from the coat-stand. Evidently Robert has visitors – ones who are either too grand or too

feeble to walk. It seems unlikely they are patients. Almost all of Robert's clientele is female, and those few gentlemen who do consult with him prefer to summon him to their homes rather than visit him here. There is no sound of conversation from his consulting room, so I assume these visitors are here on some other business. And indeed, as I make my way up to the nursery I see that the parlour door is closed. Robert and the gentlemen must be within.

Alison is dressing the children in their outdoor clothes. 'I thought I would take them for a turn around the market gardens,' she says, fastening the ties of Margaret's woollen bonnet. 'I suppose it's braw enough outside?'

'Aye, cold but bright. Hold your head up, Margaret.'

My daughter meets my eyes with a cool stare, but she tilts her chin upwards to let Alison finish her job.

Henry already has his coat and hat on. He kneels in the window seat looking down into the street. 'Is it a very hard job, Mother, to work at carrying a sedan chair?'

'I'm sure it must be, but that type of man is very strong. They do not feel tiredness in the same way as a gentleman.'

'How do you know?' Margaret asks.

I expect Alison to hush Margaret – she is usually averse to the children asking questions – but this time she says nothing. I sense she is holding back, with a certain eagerness to see how I will respond.

So how do I know that *that type of man* does not feel tiredness? It seems like one of those instances of instinctive wisdom. The labouring classes drudge from morning to night, yet still appear to have energy for all the fundamentals of

existence – courting and marrying, drinking and dancing, praying and fighting. Margaret is looking up at me, waiting for my answer.

‘That is an astute question, Margaret,’ I say, ‘for you have made me understand that I have no real basis for my observation.’

‘Young Margaret has a sharp mind,’ Alison says in an admiring tone. ‘She shines a light into dark places.’

Margaret smiles up at her, and I feel a stab of jealousy. “‘Out of the mouths of babes...’” I say, and instantly regret such a trite choice of biblical quotation. Alison glances over at me with a quizzical look on her face. I am sure she can tell that my attempt at acting the good Christian woman is no more than that – an act. It is a strange thing, but I realise it is only since my faith began to recede that I have taken to such public demonstrations of belief. In the past, when I really did believe, I was content to encounter my God and his Word in the quietness and privacy of my own mind.

Henry jumps down from his window seat. ‘Can we go now? I should like to see the sedan chairs close to, before they are carried away again.’

Alison chivvies the children out onto the stairs, and I follow them. Henry thunders down, jumping two stairs at a time, ignoring Alison’s admonitions.

We meet Hetty on the first floor landing, bearing a tray with oatcakes and sherry towards the parlour. ‘Whisht now, wee man,’ she hisses. ‘Dinnae make such a rumpus when your father has fine visitors.’

Henry giggles, and continues down the stairs with exaggerated tiptoe steps, Margaret and Alison following after him.

‘Who are our guests?’ I whisper to Hetty.

‘Let me take this in to them, Miss Isobel, and I’ll come up to the nursery and tell you all.’

A few moments later she taps on the nursery door and comes in, her eyes bright with agitation. ‘You’ll never guess it, Miss Isobel,’ she says, twisting her apron in her hands. ‘It’s two members of the Privy Council. Campbell, one gave his name as, and Hope the other.’

Campbell and Hope. I know the names. Both were judges in Thomas’s case. ‘But why are they here, Hetty? What do they want with my husband?’

‘That I cannae tell you. They’re sitting in there, with faces long as turf spades on them. I heard some mention of Thomas Aikenhead as I went in the door just now, but they stopped their talk as soon as they saw me.’ She bustles over to the window and looks out. ‘Those chair carriers are still there, loafing on our step as if it’s a tavern.’

She prattles on for a few minutes, until I bid her return to the kitchen and get on with preparing the dinner. When she is gone I sit on the old nursing chair, turning over in my mind the possible explanations for the Privy Councillors’ presence. I feel a strange compulsion to see these men who made the judgement against Thomas. The question is, how can I contrive to encounter them? It is unthinkable that they might be in my house and I not take advantage of the opportunity. At the same time, I have no wish to mortify Robert by any ill-advised conduct. I glance at the various toys and books scattered around the nursery, and my eye alights on *A Token for Children* – an improving volume. I feel sure Campbell and Hope would approve of it, with its accounts of the exemplary lives and joyful deaths of various invented Christian children. If I

encounter the gentlemen on the landing, apparently on my way upstairs to return the book to the nursery, will not that seem like the most natural occurrence in the world? I stand up, take the book in my hand and, stepping as quietly as I can, creep down the stairs from the nursery onto the landing on the floor below.

I can hear the murmur of conversation beyond the door of the parlour – the familiar timbre of Robert's voice, with occasional low-pitched interjections from the two others. It is impossible to make out what they are saying, but it seems the visitors are asking questions, and Robert is answering. The sounds act on me like an enchantment, lulling me into a kind of dream. It is a state of mind I recognise from all those long hours in church on the Sabbath, and the many, many afternoons I have been compelled to waste in the dreary society of other respectable wives. I lose track of how long I stand on the landing. When the visitors do, at last, emerge from the receiving room I am nearly caught in my trance. The door is near enough opened before I come to my senses and assume my role of the busy mother attending to her children's education.

The first grand gentleman barely acknowledges me, but the second inclines his head in my direction. I am struck by the expressiveness of his face, so unlike the stony imperturbability of his companion's. Robert follows them onto the landing.

'Isobel,' he says, his voice a little higher pitched than usual, 'I did not know you had returned.' When the two guests pause he continued, 'Gentlemen, may I introduce my wife, Isobel. Her father was the late Reverend Ogilvy of Lauder.'

The first man sighs and murmurs his own name as if this social nicety is the dullest he has ever endured. The other gentleman takes my hand and bows properly this time. 'Archibald Hope of Rankeillor, ma'am,' he says.

'This is an honour, gentlemen,' I say, doing my best to keep my voice light and modest. I must be too modest – there is clearly nothing in my manner to detain them - for they begin to move across the landing towards the stairs. How complacent they look, how untroubled by what they have done! 'I am glad of this opportunity to speak with you,' I say more boldly, ignoring Robert's look of alarm.

They stop and turn back towards me. 'Mr Campbell,' I say, addressing the grander man directly, 'you have lately caused the full weight of the law to crush a young friend of our family's.'

'I suppose you speak of Thomas Aikenhead,' he says, and immediately fixes Robert with a glare like a schoolmaster's.

'My wife was moved by the lad's tender age and orphaned state,' Robert stammers. 'You know how women are swayed by such circumstances.'

I am speechless at this betrayal. Never before in all our years of marriage has Robert belittled me in this way.

'Nonetheless,' Campbell says, 'she should not be so far swayed as to blink at atheism and blasphemy.' He addresses his remarks to Robert as if I am not present.

Archibald Hope leans forward. 'I am sure that was not Mistress Carruth's intention.' He gives me a faint smile. 'It is in a woman's disposition to show mercy and kindness – the Almighty has ordained it so, so that females are well fitted for the rearing of infants.'

‘Aye,’ says Campbell, with no hint that he agrees with Hope. ‘A little discretion is a useful attribute too. Don’t you agree, Carruth?’

Robert nods mutely.

I am filled with rage against them all, and most especially against this God of theirs, who *ordered* the world in such a manner, and demands the sacrifice of any who oppose Him, and in return gives nothing, not one answered prayer. As the three of them clump down the stairs I remember how my mother screamed out to God for relief in her final days, and how I in turn prayed for her suffering to end. He was deaf to all our imprecations. She did not die until the disease had taken all it could of her. There was not one minute, not one second of her agony commuted by her merciless creator. My fury ebbs, and for a moment I am full of fear, awaiting some dreadful punishment for such thoughts. None comes.

By nightfall my anger has transformed into *froidueur*. I retire before Robert, as is my custom, but I cannot sleep knowing that the time will eventually come for him to join me. There is no lonelier place than the marital bed when husband and wife are in disharmony. This I know better than most.

After the best part of an hour the candle has nearly burnt out, so I extinguish it. My dread is now superseded by anxiety. Why is he so late awake? Is he as angry with me as I am – as I had been – with him? It occurs to me that he might have taken it into his head to sleep apart from me. This has happened once or twice before in the course of our marriage, sometimes at my behest, sometimes by an unspoken mutual agreement. Never before has he withdrawn his company from me in this manner.

I must drop off at last, for I wake again some time later. In the January darkness it is impossible to tell how many hours have passed, or how close dawn might be. I reach out my arm to Robert's side of the bed, but it is unoccupied and cold. In an odd reversal of my earlier wish to avoid him, I now feel the need to have him by my side. I have not forgotten the manner in which he disparaged me in front of our exalted guests, but I know from old experience that this latest estrangement will only be resolved by companionship in sleep. Our bed is rarely a place of carnality, but it is often our field of refuge and reconciliation.

There is nothing for it but to seek him out, so I steel myself to the wintry cold beyond the bed-curtains and slip out of bed. I grope in the dark for the shawl I'd tossed on top of the cabinet, and wrap it around my shoulders to stop me being foundered while I light the candle. I find my slippers, and leave the bedchamber.

Robert is in his study, seated at his desk. He has a sheet of paper before him, neatly ruled into columns and rows, with some words written along the first few rows. The fire has long since burned away, and I can see my breath in the chilly air. 'Will you not come to bed?' I say. 'You will overtire yourself sitting up so late.'

He consults his pocket watch. 'Goodness... I had quite lost track of the time.'

I pull a stool up close to his desk and sit down. 'Is it your work that occupies you?'

He makes a dismissive gesture at his ruled paper. 'No. Not that.' He is silent.

'Is your... anxiety... in any way connected to our visitors today?'



‘Yes. Yes, of course.’ He stands up and begins rearranging the papers on his desk. ‘They were curious as to our friendship with Thomas and his circle. Their questions were most pointed.’

I feel my stomach tighten. ‘What information were they seeking?’

‘They want to know who first introduced Thomas to the blasphemous ideas that undid him. All who were associated with him fall under suspicion. I reassured them that our acquaintance was slight.’

‘And then I blundered in with my defence of him.’ I bury my head in my hands.

Robert crouches down beside me. ‘Do you understand now why I had to belittle you in front of them? I am heartily ashamed of myself, but I was afraid of them.’

I take his hand. ‘You have nothing to be afraid of, Robert. You are the pattern of a Christian gentleman. They may question all they like: they’ll find nothing to reproach you with.’

He nods, but the troubled expression remains on his face. ‘That may be true, but I’d prefer not to be the target of their attentions. We must be very careful from now on, Isobel. The Privy Council has sneaks on every corner.’

We walk together out into the hallway, Robert carrying the candle high to light our way. A scrap of paper, folded and sealed, lies on the floor by the front door. I had not noticed it when I came downstairs earlier. Robert sees it too, and bends to pick it up. ‘It has your name on it,’ he says, handing it to me. In the flicker of the candlelight his face looks pale and fearful.

I break the seal and open it out. There is but one line of writing. *Talbot's Close, by the Cross Keys, Leith.* Mungo's address. It must be. I am conscious of Robert's eyes on me, and show the paper to him, as there is no possibility of concealment.

'What does it mean?' he says. 'What business do you have in Leith?'

'None at all. I do not know why this has been delivered here,' I say briskly, pushing the paper into his hand. 'Here, you may do what you wish with this. Burn it, if you like.' Who can have sent it? Patrick Middleton? Robert Hutchison? It scarcely matters.

'Isobel...'

'Please, Robert, no more. Let us go to bed. I am more weary than I can express.' This is not true – my blood thrills with excitement at finding where Mungo is hiding, in spite of the dangers – but one more lie to Robert will make little difference now.

## Mungo

*If the purpose of this memoir is to honestly record all that happened then I must confess to my less noble sentiments. On the day of Thomas's trial, when my turn came to give evidence against him, I shored up my trembling spirits with thoughts of the Lion of Judah. Alas, before the righteousness of the Lord could enter my heart some darker impulse took hold. I was the centre of attention. For the first time in all our acquaintance it was I who was being listened to, not him. At the time I convinced myself I was filled with godliness, but I now recognise that my heart was swollen with unholy conceit. And fear, as well. Thomas had named me in his petition for release. Said I was as much a freethinker as he. This was his revenge for my pamphlet – the very pamphlet he had demanded I write.*

*There I was. Standing. Giving evidence. All eyes on me, and my eyes on nothing but the air above the Lord Advocate's head. Questions sang at me across the room, and the crowd crushed behind me. It was like standing with my back to a forest. That weight of darkness and hidden life behind me, whispering.*

*Questions. Yes, my name is Mr Mungo Craig. Yes, I am a student in Edinburgh. Yes, I am aged twenty-one years, unmarried, purged of malice, prejudice and partial counsel, and solemnly sworn...*

*And what did I swear? That often – so often! – I heard Mr Aikenhead scoff at and ridicule the Holy Scriptures, and – yes – say they were a rhapsody of nonsense, and worse than the fiction of the poets. And, yes, he called Jesus Christ an impostor who had learned magic in Egypt, and then returned to Judea and picked up some blockish, ignorant fisher-fellows to be his followers.*

*And, yes, Mr Aikenhead said that the miracles of the New Testament were no more than pranks played by Christ on these same foolish followers. And, yes, he said that Holy Scripture was stuffed with such contradictions that the stupidity of the world was admirable in having believed them so long. And, yes, he hoped to see Christianity extirpated, and cursed those who had baptised him, and that baptism was no more than a magical ceremony that tied children's imagination to that religion. And, yes, he claimed he would make Christianity tremble, and he would write against it, and do all he could to wipe it from the face of our nation. And, yes, I know he accuses me of giving him the books that planted these poisonous seeds in his head, but I deny it, and he says it was me who drew him in with my questions, but I deny it, and says I am as guilty as he, but I deny that too.*

*So. I said no more – or no worse, at any rate – than the other witnesses. No worse than Patrick. I scarcely recognised the rest of them. Students, I suppose. That's what they said they were.*

*Thomas's eyes were fixed on me. I had no choice, I wanted to say. I was summonsed. Yes. We all were. And Patrick, poor Patrick. All those protestations of loyalty, forgotten when he opened the Privy Council's Letter of Exculpation.*

*The jury retired to consider the evidence, with instructions to return the next day – Christmas Eve – to give their verdict. Patrick found me in the crowd.*

*'He'll surely get the sackcloth and ashes, don't you think? It being a first offence and all.'*

*'Are you stupid?' I snapped.*

*Patrick stepped away from me, the hurt expression on his face changing gradually into something colder. 'There are worse things to be,' he said quietly, then turned and left me, jostling his way through the press of people.*

I hear the carriage approach and stop near the house. It must be someone for me. No one else in Talbot's Close would have visitors who travel by carriage. The light, fearless knock on the front door. My mother rising from her seat and shuffling to open it. Her reply to whoever it is stands there. 'You've come tae see Mungo. I ken that well enough. You may come in then.'

Nothing for it but to see who awaits me. I can't judge from my mother's tone who it might be. Officers of the Privy Council? Patrick, returned with more bad news? Perhaps – wild hope – a compassionate benefactor? I descend the stair.

Mistress Carruth, dressed in mourning. Her sombre colours drain the light from the room. As she turns to look at me I hear the silk of her skirts rustle. No penitential worsted cloth for her garments, in spite of her bereavement.

'You'll no' be wanting me here,' Mother says. She lifts her mending basket and retreats upstairs.

'What do you want with me?' I ask Mistress Carruth.

She looks around the room. 'May I sit down?' she asks. There's no hint of hauteur in her voice, and I cringe at my uncouthness in not offering her a chair unprompted. I direct her to the best seat, and sit on the second best. She settles

herself and runs her gloved hands over her skirts, smoothing them. I notice a light sheen of sweat on her brow.

‘These last days must have been difficult for you,’ she says.

Her consideration is so unexpected that I feel tongue-tied, much as I did at those wretched dinners we attended at her house. I know I should offer some condolence for the loss of her mother, but the words do not come.

‘I am confused, Mr Craig,’ she says. ‘I struggle to comprehend your part in Thomas’s misadventure. I do not know whether to condemn you or pity you.’

‘Most people seem to have decided to condemn me.’

She pauses, as if considering this. ‘I read your pamphlets,’ she says. ‘Both of them.’

‘Well?’

She stiffens slightly. Perhaps my tone was too abrupt. ‘I can understand your reasons for writing the second one...’

‘Yes, I had to clear my name. He was accusing me of equal guilt with him. Every petition he submitted to the Privy Council tried to pass the blame to me. It was the talk of the coffee houses. I had to do something to defend myself.’

She nods. ‘It’s the first one that perplexes me, Mr Craig. Why did you do that to Thomas? I know you had no choice but to stand witness at the trial, but no one compelled you to publish his foolishness.’

‘Would you believe me if I told you that it was Thomas’s suggestion?’

That stops her short. I can see her thinking, remembering how Thomas’s mind would vault from one daring idea to the next. At length she shakes her head. ‘*Will Scotland nourish such apostacy?*’ she said, quoting from the pamphlet. ‘*Atone with blood the affronts of heaven’s offended throne.* Do you

expect me to believe that Thomas asked you to write a pamphlet calling for his own death?’

I can think of nothing to say that will not condemn me more in her eyes.

‘It seems to me,’ she goes on, ‘that you were determined to settle a score with Thomas. *Am I always to keep silent? Am I never to get a word in?*’ The lines from Juvenal I had used on the front cover. ‘Those sound like the words of a bitter, jealous man.’

I know it is wisest to keep silent, but some sense of righteousness compels me to speak. ‘Thomas infuriated me. Always so full of himself. When he came into any room everyone turned to him. If he was in high spirits, then so were the rest of us. When he was sullen none of us dared smile.’

‘He was everything you were not,’ Mistress Carruth says. ‘Envy seems a petty reason to send a friend to the gallows.’ There’s a sting in her voice.

Well I can sting too. ‘You had a part to play, Mistress Carruth.’

That stops her. ‘How so?’

‘Do you mind the first time I came to dinner at your house?’ She frowns, then shakes her head ruefully. ‘Of course you don’t. I was no more than one of Thomas’s crowd, eh?’

‘If I was in any way ungracious, I apologise.’

I shrug and carry on. ‘I made some comment to you - an attempt at a witticism, I suppose. It must have been the only time I managed to interrupt Thomas. Perhaps I was hoping to impress you. That’s what smart young men are meant to do, isn’t it? Exchange badinage with their lovely hostess?’

‘And what happened then?’

‘Och, it fell flat, or course. I saw you and Thomas exchange a glance. It was clear enough what your meaning was. Not one of us. That was when I knew. It didn’t matter how hard I strived. I would never belong with your class. You might say that was when it began. The seed was planted that flowered on Gallowlee.’

She says nothing for a moment, and seems in deep thought. ‘You exacted a heavy price from Thomas for this slight.’

‘Do you think I intended matters to go so far?’ My hands are shaking. ‘I wanted to scare him. Knock him off his perch.’

‘Thomas said that you read those cursed atheistical books as hungrily as he did. Is that true?’

‘Reading is not the same as believing.’

‘So why did Thomas claim in his gallows speech that you were as much a freethinker as he was?’

‘Because he was fixed on destroying my character from beyond the grave,’ I say. ‘All those things he claimed – that it was I who first showed him the damnable books that led him astray, that it was I who betrayed him to the Privy Council – all lies. But who will take my word against his? He’s better thought of now that he’s dead. It’s a fancy trick he’s played on me, and that’s a fact. Who would believe that a lad on the brink of eternity would waste his last breath on uttering falsehoods? But that’s what he did. I will swear on the Holy Bible, the things he said about me were untrue.’ I stop, exhausted. My shirt feels damp with sweat. I fear I may have been shouting. ‘You blame me for his death. I can see it in your face.’



She shakes her head. 'This did not begin with you. I hold our great men most particularly responsible. You were no more significant than the worm on the fisherman's hook.' I cannot think how to respond. She exonerates me with an insult. 'What will you do now?'

The impossibility of my situation closes in on me. Perhaps she will help me – she has the means, for certain, and I think she is not lacking in compassion. 'I am excluded from the University, and am afraid to return even when I am readmitted. My mother is obliged to take in extra mending to make ends meet, and I have no means of earning a living.'

She thinks for a moment. 'You could teach. Find a wee school beyond Edinburgh in need of a domini.'

'No better than that? My greatest wish is to serve the Lord as a minister.'

She looks at me sadly. 'And why should you be granted your greatest wish when so many are denied theirs?'

I have no answer to give her. She stands and walks over to the window, stooping to peer out. 'The day is clouding over. I had best be on my way before the rain comes on.' She fastens her veil, so that her face is quite concealed.

I go to the door and hold it open for her. The carriage is sitting at the end of the close. She must have hired it, for I do not recall that her husband kept one. As she goes out she turns to me. 'You are young, Mungo. There will be a future for you, no matter how bleak things look now. Be thankful for your good fortune.'

'I thank God daily for His blessings.'

She lowers her head prayerfully and murmurs, 'Amen,' then walks across the close towards the carriage. Before she has gone far she turns back and says, 'Was it you who informed on Thomas?'

I swallow. 'No,' I say. 'It was not.'

Hidden as she is behind her veil I cannot attempt to read her expression, nor guess whether she believes me or not. 'Well, well,' she says, 'I wonder who did?'

## Isobel

The carriage lurches like a ship in a roiling sea as the driver turns it back towards the city. The windows are shuttered. I feel suffocated and blind behind my veil and lift it away.

‘Well?’ says Dr Maxwell from the seat opposite. ‘Did young Mr Craig provide you with the answers you sought?’

‘Some of them, but not all. There are many things I still do not know for certain. Who informed on Thomas. Whether or not it was Mungo who introduced him to those books. What Mungo *really* believes.’

‘Do these things really matter to you?’

‘I think I would take comfort in the truth.’

*‘The more I thought thereon, the further I was from finding the verity I desired,’* Dr Maxwell says. In the half-light of the carriage interior it is hard to discern the expression on his face, but I think I see him smile sadly, and am touched that he remembers Thomas’s words. ‘Can you be content without that verity?’

I look at the shuttered window, wishing I could fling it open. ‘I suppose the best I can do is recount the narrative in my own mind. There is no conclusion, no verdict. I must be satisfied with chronicling the events and nothing more.’

We sit in silence as the carriage rattles along. It slows to a steadier pace on the long gradual slope of the road from Leith to Edinburgh. I wonder if we have yet passed the Gallowlee. Dr Maxwell is observing me. Nothing so bold as a stare, but I sense his gaze flicker towards me. In the close confines of the carriage we sit knee to knee, brushing closer to each other with every lurch, and then away again. If I think too long about what I have done in order to visit

Mungo – this secretive journey, the excuses I gave Robert, the danger to my good name – the fear will overwhelm me. And yet, this is the safest way. The carriage hire is in Dr Maxwell's name, and who will raise an eyebrow at a city physician wishing to make a trip to the coast? Had I insisted on making the journey alone, the risks were so much greater of someone taking notice.

After a time the carriage slows still further, swaying and creaking as it takes any number of turns. Eventually it stops. The driver thumps three times on the roof – some signal, I take it, agreed between himself and Dr Maxwell.

'Are we arrived?' I ask, reaching up to my veil.

Dr Maxwell leans forward and stays my hand. 'Do not cover your face,' he says. 'It is the only part of you that is not swathed in garments.' He keeps hold of my hand, quite gently, and lowers it onto my lap. 'Will you take off a glove?' he says. When I do not reply he unfastens the wrist buttons and eases the glove off my left hand. His own hands are bare. The sensation of his fingers cradling mine disturbs me and compels me in equal measure. He bows his head and kisses the palm of my hand with such tenderness that I can barely stop myself from crying out.

Suddenly I am afraid, as if I have walked in my sleep and now awoken on the edge of a precipice. I pull my hand away from him. He sits back in his seat, studying me. 'I suppose you will now tell me I have insulted you?' he says.

'No. I will not.' I feel a flare of anger towards him, and disappointment too. 'I am not a coquette – please do not think I am playing some amorous game.' He begins to reply, but I speak over him. 'I did understand, Dr Maxwell, that in accepting your help I might, in some way, be indebted to you. I was not so naïve as not to realise the manner in which you might wish to collect that debt.'

‘You speak as if we were merchants in the Cloth Market, trading bolts of wool and linen. Hardly the language of romance.’

The driver gives another three thumps to the roof of the carriage. ‘Why does he keep doing that?’ I snap.

Dr Maxwell laughs bitterly. ‘I am to reply to his signal,’ he says. ‘One knock of my cane on the roof means drive on to the back of St Giles, where I collected you earlier. Two knocks means take a turn out towards Arthur’s Seat.’

‘Why Arthur’s Seat?’

‘There are quiet lanes aplenty there where a carriage may park with none to notice it. The sort of places where a driver will be content to leave his passengers in peace for a long as they please, if the fare is right.’

I feel my face warm with consciousness at what his words signify. There is something so tawdry in the arrangement he describes – tawdrier, certainly, than merchants in the Cloth Market. And yet my palm still tingles with the memory of his mouth pressing against my skin.

‘Well?’ he says, raising his cane towards the roof of the carriage. ‘Shall I make one knock, or two?’

When I return home Agnes hands me a note from Katharine Aikenhead, asking me to call with her. She gives an address near the Netherbow, and the hours when she will be at home. It is growing dark, and too late in the day for visiting, so I resolve to call with her the next day. I wonder at what prompted her request – what fresh anger has roused her – and am glad to be distracted by my speculations. It stops me dwelling on what occurred with Dr Maxwell – enables me to dismiss it as something not quite real.

Katharine's lodgings are on the fourth floor of a tall tenement. It is a middling sort of place, for while I am nearly knocked to one side by an ill-fed barefoot child hurtling down the stairs – his mother's cries of abuse echoing after him down the stairwell – I also find my progress across the fourth floor landing observed by a respectable-looking widow woman peering out of her door. It is, therefore, like so many Edinburgh tenements: a place the poor might aspire to, and the genteel descend to.

Katharine answers my knock and ushers me in. She appears calm. I glance discreetly around the room. It is large and bright, with two tall windows, but the furniture is sparse, and there is too little of it for so commodious a space. A door leads off it, but the chamber beyond seems just as empty, from what I can see of it. Still, it is a decent enough abode, and of some value in our overcrowded city. I can understand why Katharine will not willingly give it up to the authorities. 'My advocate tells me it may be some time before the matter of Thomas's property is resolved.'

'The law moves slowly.'

She gives me a sharp look. 'It moves hastily enough when it wishes to.'

I remember the brief fortnight between Thomas's conviction and execution. He would likely have been hurried to the gallows even faster had the Privy Council not been compelled to pause for the Christmas season: Katharine has it right.

'So,' she continues, 'I have determined that I will sell what I can of his moveables, and then if the case goes against me I will at least have retained something.'

‘I see.’ I think of my mother’s bedchamber in Lauder, its cupboards full of her gowns and fripperies. The notion of sorting through her possessions was scarcely bearable. It must be done at some point, but not yet. Katharine does not have the luxury of mourning as I do. I feel a pang of guilt, both at the ease of my own life, and at the antipathy Katharine’s pragmatism stirred in me. ‘Is there something I can do to help you?’

‘No,’ she says bluntly. ‘It is merely this.’ She beckons me into the other room and I follow. There is a narrow bed stripped of all bedding, and a small table with a few tattered books on it. She picks up one of the books and hands it to me. ‘This is yours, I believe?’

The binding is unfamiliar. I turn to the title page: *A Relation of the Fearfull Estate of Francis Spira*. A vague memory stirs. Yes, I remembered the tale – an old one, about the wickedness of the Roman church. Spira had been compelled to recant his Protestantism, and in the process had lost all faith and died in despair. It has been many years since I read it.

‘I see from your face that you do not believe me,’ Katharine says, that edge of anger back in her voice. ‘Look at what is written on the inside of the front cover.’

I do as she instructs. There, indeed, in Robert’s neat script, are the words *From the library of Dr Carruth, 1678*. And beneath, in a childish copperplate, *Given to Thomas Aikenhead by Mrs Carruth, March 1682*. This second inscription must, I assume, have been written by Thomas. 1682. The year of my marriage. Those first turbulent months as a wife have left many scars on my memory, but I have no recollection of giving Thomas this book. I remembered taking him by the hand and leading him away so that his father and Robert

could talk in privacy. He would have been no more than five or six years old, but even then his sharp intelligence was clear to see. Strange that when I think of it now I can remember clearly the ache in my heart as he curled his fingers around mine, and how I had wondered if I would ever have a child of my own to hold my hand, ever have a proper marriage. Why was it that the memory of these feelings was so acute, and yet I cannot recall giving him the book?

‘I had planned to sell it,’ Katharine says, interrupting my reverie, ‘but when I saw the inscription I thought it might... cause difficulties for you and your husband.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Guilt by association. The Privy Council are still rooting out freethinkers, confiscating books, sending their spies into the coffee houses and taverns. Perhaps I should have burnt it – Lord knows, I could do with the fuel – but it seemed to me it was not mine to dispose of. You may do with it as you please.’

‘Thank you.’ For a moment I consider confessing to her that it was I who had circulated Thomas’s speech. It seems ungrateful to maintain my deceit when she has shown me some kindness. But something holds me back. It is partly fear of provoking her anger, but also another less craven motivation. What was it Patrick Middleton said to me that day he’d followed me from Hutchison’s bookshop? Something about us not being able to undo what was done. How true that is. What benefit will there be in honesty now? Better to let things lie.

I am confident that Dr Maxwell will not be calling. The game has run its course, and I am glad of it. As each hour ticks by I suffer an increasing oppression of



spirit. I steel myself to untie the ribbon on the bundle of letters from my mother. As I read them I remember her as she once was – her sharp, jackdaw eye; her obsession with the right way of cooking mutton; her childlike delight in little vanities of dress. These memories are not sufficient to erase the images of those last terrible days of her life, but they are something, I suppose. A counterweight. I find that I can cry for her now, for the light extinguished.

I sit with the children while Alison reads out loud from the Bible, and bite my lip to stop myself from questioning, criticising, doubting. When I have time to myself, I write frantically in my journal. The empty page is the only place where I can express myself freely. Even then I am gripped with fear – not of a vengeful God, for I am now almost sure that none such exists – but of someone else stumbling upon my words. Alison, perhaps – what delight she would take in exposing me to censure! Each day I rip what I have written from the journal and throw it on the fire. If my words are turned to ash they cannot be used against me. And yet I cannot not bear to destroy the book I once gave to Thomas that is now returned to me. I reread it, and a confusion of feelings revives. When I first turned its pages my faith was strong and I had pitied poor Francis Spira as his own belief fell away. But now I wonder if even then some seed was planted that came to fruition these last few months. The very idea that religious faith could die – I had probably never considered it before first reading this book. Did it work in the same manner on Thomas? He had only been a child when it came into his possession. Even with his precocious talent, it would have been beyond him, would it not? I do not know. I can be sure of nothing.

## **Mungo**

Another knock at the front door. So many visitors. This time there are no voices. Nothing but Mother's painful ascent of the stairs. She carries a package into the room. It's stoutly parcelled up and tied with string. I take it from her. A fair weight. She lifts the tray and leaves the room. No curiosity to know what the box contains.

I set it on my bed, and sit down to be more comfortable while I examine it. Unknot the string, and unwrap it. It contains a black lacquer box. Open it up and find a thick cotton moneybag within. My heartbeat quickens. Salvation at last. Reach in and pull out a handful of silver ten-shilling pieces. Enough to buy food and fuel for a month or more. Or to buy my passage away from this place. Not as far as America, I think, but far enough to let me start again. I throw the coins on the bed and empty the rest of the bag's contents alongside it. Mother will be up again soon. Her sharp ears will hear the clink of money. I count the coins, and taste the bitterness of my mysterious benefactor's wee joke. Thirty pieces of silver. Of course.

A daybreak departure, this time. I bid Mother farewell. Promise to write when I'm settled. Promise to send money when I have any to send. I'm leaving her half of my ten-shilling pieces.

This last time, I decide not to skulk by any back way. The Lion of Judah is by my side once more. I'll walk up the road from Leith, through the city, out by the West Port and then westwards towards Portpatrick.

There are others on the road at this time of day. The cold nips my nose, so I pull my muffler up to cover my face. I've an old cloak on, and workman's

clothes. They will do well for the journey. I have my better clothes in the bag over my shoulder.

Perhaps I should think of a new name for myself. Start afresh. Who was it once told me of the clansmen who took on the name of Black to hide their true allegiance? Mungo Black. No. Mungo is too memorable. Kentigern, then? Kentigern Black. Mister Kentigern Black, minister of religion.

There's the Gallowlee, up ahead, and the gallows still standing. Bare, thank the Lord. Slower now. Steady. No need to rush past. My heart batters that hard against my ribs I can feel it in my throat. As if it would leap out of me and run on, all the way to the western sea.

Stop now. Be a man. Face it. Remember, the Lion of Judah walks by your side. Turn off the road, up the track to the scaffold. A pair of cawbies on the crossbeam. One stretches its wings and gives a squawk.

There's a patch of ground that looks as if it's not long turned. It could be him. Most hangings are at the Grassmarket still, and the bodies returned to the families. No such tenderness for Thomas's remains.

I should speak. Pray. But what words? None come. Not even the simplest.

Back. Back onto the road. Onward.

A last look up at Calton Hill. A last glance at the murky waters of the Nor' Loch. A farewell to the castle. Here's the West Port. The road away from here, to Covenanter country. Beyond it the coast and the sea route to Ulster. Hard people, secure in the safety of implacable belief. There'll maybe be a place there for a Soldier of Christ, such as I.

## Isobel

After supper Robert disappears into his consulting room and closes the door. He has been preoccupied these last days, saying little beyond what is necessary and – it seems to me – avoiding my company. I harden my heart against guilt. There is nothing to be gained from it.

I take the children upstairs, and loiter in the nursery until they are in bed. Alison carries on as if I am not there, but I feel that her every word and action is performed for me. I wonder if I could find some reason to dispense with her. Henry is nearly beyond needing a nurse, but Margaret is attached to her. I do not want to give my daughter another reason to fix me with those accusing eyes of hers.

When there is nothing else to be done I return downstairs. Before I go into the parlour I peer over the banister and see that Robert's consulting room door is still closed. Time passes. I have been reading by lamplight for long enough to make my eyes tired when I hear the door to the consulting room creak open. I hold my breath and wait as Robert ascends the stair and comes to the door of the parlour.

'Are you there, Isobel?'

'Yes. Please come in.' I put aside my book and stand up to meet him.

He hesitates in the doorway. 'Will you step into my consulting room? There is a matter I must discuss with you.' There is a fearful tremor in his voice that makes me sick with anxiety.

Once in the consulting room he bids me sit down. 'What is it, Robert? I can see something is wrong. Are you unwell?'

He shakes his head but will not meet my gaze. He kneels in front of one of the low cupboards and unlocks the door, then reaches inside and brings out first one book, then another, and then a third. The books are unfamiliar, but that means nothing. Robert's consulting room is full of books, and he is often in receipt of new ones. He looks up at me. 'I am afraid to show you these, Isobel, but I can no longer bear this burden alone.'

I am confused. He looks as tortured by remorse as any penitent. I rise from my chair and kneel down beside him on the floor. He hands me one of the books. I open it to the title page. '*Christianity Not Mysterious*,' I say.

'Keep your voice low,' Robert whispers, glancing at the door.

I take the next book. *The Oracles of Reason*. The third book is *A Critical History of the Old Testament*. 'I don't understand,' I say. 'What are these books? Why are you so concerned about them?'

'These are the very titles that inspired Thomas's freethinking. The ones the Privy Council is determined to suppress. If Campbell and Hope had only known they were sitting but a flight of stairs away from the very volumes they deem blasphemous! I should have thrown them on the fire the moment they left, but I could not bear to. How could I see the words of our best thinkers reduced to ashes? And yet I should have done it, had I valued our safety. I have been tormented by the thought of them hidden here, and you, all innocence...'

I push aside a pang at Robert's misguided view of me, and turn the pages of *The Oracles of Reason*. I pick on a line and read it out to him. "'I myself could shew a catalogue of doubts, never yet imagined nor questioned, which are not resolved in Scripture,'" I quote. 'I am sure the Privy Council would understand

that a learned Christian gentleman might want to familiarise himself with such works, in order to refute their thesis.'

Robert bows his head and covers his face with his hands. 'Don't you see what I have done?' He pauses, striving to control his emotions while I struggle to understand what it was he was telling me.

'Calm yourself, Robert. There's no harm done. No one but you and I know they are here.'

'Mungo knows,' he says, so quietly I barely hear him.

'How?'

Robert carries on as if he had not heard me. 'We only spoke of it the once. I was showing them – he and Thomas and Patrick – my collection. Showing off, I suppose. There was something in Thomas that irritated me, made me feel that I had to remind him of my standing. Then we were called for dinner. Mungo and I lingered a moment, and I let him see these books. I don't know why. Perhaps I saw something of myself in him. He had none of Thomas's spark and fire, but yet...' He looks over at me, haggard with remorse. 'If I had known what those moments would lead to...'

And Mungo had spared me this knowledge. Or perhaps he had withheld it, not from delicacy toward my feelings, but out of some echo of sympathy with Robert.

'You cannot attribute Thomas's downfall to your discussing these books with Mungo,' I say.

'Can I not? Thomas said it was Mungo who first led him to such conversations.'

‘Thomas had been a sceptic since childhood. He said so himself in his gallows speech. It was not your books that put the doubt in his heart.’

‘But I drew Mungo’s attention to such works. And doubtless that drew him to the University library where he and Thomas could read them at leisure. These books gave Thomas the words to express his ideas, and the encouragement that he was not alone in entertaining them.’

I turn another page of the book in my hand. There *are* others who think as I did. This book is evidence of it. The men who wrote these books would not have been shocked by my doubts. And what of Robert? I take a deep breath and speak. ‘When I first read of Thomas’s notions I was appalled,’ I say.

Robert looks intently at me. ‘What do you mean, Isobel?’

I hesitate, gathering my thoughts. ‘Do you believe in boggarts, Robert? Or brownies? Or silkies?’

‘Of course not. Those daft tales are for cottars and auld yins in the country.’

‘What of witches? There’s many a wise man will hunt them down.’

He makes a dismissive gesture, very much the man of science. ‘I wouldn’t call any man wise who burns a half-dozen crones because some farmer’s cattle get the head-staggers. People will sicken and die, and crops will fail, but it’s nothing to do with some old bizzum chanting spells.’

‘These are foolish notions for simple-minded people, yes?’

‘Yes indeed, but Isobel...’

My heart is beating hard in my breast, but I force myself on. ‘What of water being turned into wine, then? Or a storm being stilled with a few words? Or the dead rising?’ Robert seems frozen, staring down at the books, but I continue in a whisper. ‘Are these not foolish notions too? They make as little sense as spells

and boggarts.' He nods slowly. 'What think you of the notions written here in these books?' I lay my hand over his. 'Please be honest with me.'

His eyes search my face in a kind of panic. At last he says, 'I regret to say... I share the views of their authors.'

It is as if I have been released from an unbearable burden. The oppression that hemmed me in at every turn melts away. 'As do I,' I say, watching him to see how he will respond.

He frowns, and stares as if he fears he has misunderstood me. I nod slowly to confirm that he has heard right. 'For how long?' he says.

'I cannot tell. Once I believed, and now I do not. My mother's dying days, I think, were the final end of my faith. And you?'

'For nearly as long as I can remember. The more I observed of the world, of the arbitrary workings of nature, the less I believed they were directed by any higher power.' He squeezes my hand gently. 'We must tell no one.'

'Of course.'

'We will go to Kirk on the Sabbath. Continue with our daily Bible readings and prayers.'

'Yes. And never let the children see our doubt. Never.'

Robert looks at the three books. 'We have to burn these. I'll not rest easy until they are gone.'

I do not reply, but lift the guard away from the fire. Robert begins tearing pages from one of the books and throwing the leaves onto the fire. I take another and do the same. The flames flare and die down quickly, as they will when burning paper. We work diligently until we are left with three empty bindings. Robert rips each of them in two along the spine, and adds them to the



fire, one at a time so as not to overwhelm it. When it is done he stands up stiffly and sits in his chair. 'Will you sit beside me, Isobel?'

I pull the other chair alongside him, and sit.

'Did I kill Thomas?' he says.

'No,' I reply. 'No more than any of us.' I think of the book Katharine gave me. I will not destroy it, whatever the dangers of keeping it in my possession. It is hidden where not even Margaret will find it, like a secret, silent cry of defiance against those who would suppress free thought. I take Robert's hand and hold it tightly.

So we sit, hands clasped as if we fear we might fall without the other to cling to. The fire crackles, but I am chilled by the knowledge that beyond our shuttered window lies the dark city, and above it the endless fathoms of the heavens. Some might look up at the night sky and discern the hand of God in the pattern of the stars. Not Robert and I. If we see patterns they are the product of our own longings. All that is real is contained in this room, at this moment. The warmth of skin on skin; the consolation of a hand holding mine; the knowledge that I have, after all, a true companion for the short and troubled journey that we call life.

# **Inventing history: how do research, imagination and memory fuse creatively in the writing of an historical novel?**

## **Introduction**

*Freethinkers* fluttered into existence on a quiet morning in Belfast as I leafed through some old textbooks at work. A book entitled *The Rise of Scientific Europe* caught my eye. There, in a section on Scotland's role in scientific progress, was a passing mention of a curious story: 'In 1696 an 18-year-old Edinburgh University student was executed for denying some of the propositions of Christianity.'<sup>1</sup>

A cursory few minutes of internet research uncovered the story of Thomas Aikenhead. In spite of his youth, and the fact that he had neither published his irreligious thoughts nor sought to persuade others to his viewpoint, he had been hanged for blasphemy at the behest of an implacable Scottish Kirk. He was the last person in Britain to suffer the ultimate penalty for the crime.

What was it about this event that drew me in? It can be hard to pin down exactly why certain ideas set a story in motion. Nevertheless, I will endeavour in this introduction to identify how this incident from Early Modern Scotland found some sort of echo in my own experience and thinking.

When I encountered Thomas Aikenhead's story for the first time, I was preoccupied with the issue of religious faith. Over the preceding years I had moved from belief to unbelief. This transition had been gradual. It was (and still is) accompanied by a sense of both liberation and bereavement. The idea that a person might be executed for atheism – for a thought, rather than a deed – was

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<sup>1</sup> David Goodman and Colin Russell (eds), *The Rise of Scientific Europe 1500 - 1800* (London: Hodder Arnold H&S, 1991), p. 281.

unsettling. While Europeans from the Judeo-Christian tradition can console themselves that such punishments are – literally – a thing of the past, apostasy remains a dangerous path to follow in many other parts of the world. Thomas Aikenhead's story may be history, but the issues he wrestled with - of daring to believe outside the orthodoxy, or to disbelieve altogether - are still current for many people.

Thomas was executed in the figurative darkness before the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment, and this, perhaps, is another reason his story resonates with me. I am a Northern Irish Protestant, and as such am the cultural product of a peculiar mixture of literalist religiosity and the pragmatic outworking of the Scottish Enlightenment. Lord Trimble, the former Ulster Unionist First Minister of Northern Ireland, summed up this mindset well in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1998:

The tradition from which I come, but by which I am not confined, produced the first vernacular Bible in the language of the common people, and contributed much to the scientific language of the Enlightenment. It puts a great price on the precise use of words, and uses them with circumspection, so much so that our passion for precision is often confused with an indifference to idealism. Not so. But I am personally and perhaps culturally conditioned to be sceptical of speeches which are full of sound and fury, idealistic in intention, but impossible of

implementation; and I resist the kind of rhetoric which substitutes vapour for vision.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways this quote highlights the tension at the heart of the Northern Irish Protestant psyche: the mindset is pragmatic, hard-headed and innately sceptical, except when it comes to one specific area of the supernatural - Bible-based religious belief. The Enlightenment respect for rational thought co-exists oddly with unquestioning faith. In *Freethinkers* a 17<sup>th</sup> century nursery maid silences a child's questions with the comment, 'God's ways are not our ways.' This is a response that is still heard in 21<sup>st</sup> century Northern Ireland.

When writing my first novel, *Magdeburg*, which focuses on Protestant/Catholic conflict in Germany during the Thirty Years War, I had to do a great deal of research on the different Christian theologies competing for supremacy in post-Reformation Europe. In doing so I was confronted with my own fundamentalist/literalist tendencies: most people raised in the Protestant tradition will regard the Bible as the *only* credible religious text – a view that persists even when they have set aside belief in the literal and spiritual truth of that text. The notion of 'continuing revelation' is suspect; the idea that the narrative of the Gospels can be added to (for example, the development of extra-biblical stories about the life and death of the Virgin Mary) is utterly rejected. This distrust of literary embroidery and invention means Protestant culture can be a cold house for an impractical creative activity like fiction writing. As the Irish academic Anthony Bradley articulates, it is a culture with

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<sup>2</sup> David Trimble, *Nobel Lecture*, 1998, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1998/trimble-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1998/trimble-lecture.html) [accessed 24/7/2012] (paras 11 & 12).

'a history of indifference or antagonism to art.'<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the idea that we should value the 'precise use of words' as Lord Trimble identifies, alongside an understanding of the power invested in the written word, must surely speak to all writers, whatever their cultural background. Words were Thomas Aikenhead's undoing; not just those he spoke, but – as we shall shortly see – those that were written about him. Ultimately he too used the written word to answer those who criticised and condemned him. It seems fitting that in *Freethinkers* his story is explored and re-imagined in the form of a novel.

As I did more research into the historical context in which Thomas's story unfolded I began to see parallels with recent Northern Irish history. The period from 1680 to 1688 in Scotland was one of appalling violence even by seventeenth-century standards. The 'Killing Time' was the culmination of tension between the officially sanctioned Church of Scotland and the Covenanters, who adhered to a more fundamentalist form of Presbyterianism. The Church of Scotland had been a source of anxiety for the monarchy almost from its inception. Unlike the Church of England it was not an established church, and had no bishops. The Stuart kings recognised that such independence was a potential threat to their authority, and tried to rein the church in by imposing an Episcopal structure and – in the case of Charles I – an Anglican-style prayer book. Opposition was expressed through the National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, and increasingly in skirmishes between Covenanters and the authorities. After the Restoration in 1660, Presbyterian clergy were obliged to accept the new

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Bradley, 'Literature and Culture in the North of Ireland', in M. Kenneally (ed), *Cultural Contexts and Literary Idioms in Contemporary Irish Literature*, quoted in Barry Sloan, *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), p. 92.

dispensation, which included the introduction of bishops, or lose their livings. Tensions rose still further when the Catholic convert James II (James VII of Scotland) succeeded his brother in 1685. He was in favour of easing the penal laws against Catholics, while maintaining or increasing those against fundamentalist Protestants such as the Covenanters. Dissent was suppressed with varying degrees of brutality – for example, field preaching by clergymen who had refused to conform became a capital offence. Meanwhile mainstream followers of the Church of Scotland heard of the apparent resurgence of a Catholic establishment in England with increasing anxiety. The birth of a son to the King's young Italian wife increased their fears of a return to a Catholic monarchy.

The 'Killing Time' saw many hundreds of Covenanters killed, either in engagements with the army or at the end of a rope for crimes such as possession of a weapon or refusing to swear loyalty to the King. It took the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to put an end to the bloodshed. Many of the Scottish bishops appointed after the Restoration felt unable to renege on their oaths of allegiance to James II, whereas the Presbyterian members of the Privy Council travelled to London in support of William III. Their reward was a law protecting the non-Episcopal Church of Scotland. The persecution of Presbyterians ended; exiles returned; property and position were restored to many who had found themselves on the wrong side over the preceding years.

It seems ironic that Thomas's downfall came in what we might call the post-conflict era – a time when life was opening up again after the repression of the 'Killing Time'. This spoke to my own experience of post-conflict Northern Ireland, which is a much less comfortable psychological space than one might

expect. There is something reassuring about communal war: friends and enemies are clearly delineated, as are notions of good and evil, right and wrong. Post-conflict is murky territory, a place of compromise, of principles set aside in pursuit of the greater good, of an inconsistently applied policy of official amnesia. It is also a place where the past can abruptly and sometimes unexpectedly rupture the present – a dissident bombing; the findings of an historical inquiry; the elevation to high office of those directly responsible for murder. It occurred to me that I could infuse Thomas's story with the unease of a post-conflict society. I could also put my own experiences to work, exploiting and transforming them in order to bring to life the way Thomas's prosecution and execution might have been felt by the society of his time. 'Memory' in the context of this critical commentary should be understood as personal experience seen through the filter of time.

When I embarked upon *Freethinkers* I intended that the story of Thomas's downfall would form the main subject of the novel, but as my research progressed I encountered an earlier historical incident involving Thomas's father. This eventually gave rise to the first section of the novel, and the introduction of two major fictional characters – Dr Robert Carruth and his wife Isobel. The incident in question took place in 1682, when the 'Killing Time' was at its worst. Once again I could see a parallel with the history of the Northern Irish conflict. A structure began to emerge out of this thinking: Part 1 of *Freethinkers* would be set during Scotland's Early Modern 'Troubles', and Parts 2 and 3 in the 'post-ceasefire' period. Chapter One of this critical commentary will explore the historical facts behind the story in more depth, and examine how it has been interpreted in both non-fiction and fiction.

Although *Freethinkers* is an historical novel set in Scotland, I do not situate it in a line of Scottish novels running from the works of Scott through to Hogg and onward to Stevenson. I would place it more in the genre that Amy J Elias identifies as metahistorical romance, or postmodern historical fiction – a genre that shares a ‘genetic code’ with the historical romance, but has evolved by way of modernism and postmodernism and understands that the ‘history’ being depicted is in some sense ‘culturally contaminated’ by the politics of the present.<sup>4</sup> It is apparent from some of my first journal notes (reproduced below) that this is where the novel was tending from the very outset.

**28 October 2008**

...Perhaps a good initial approach would be to write a series of short pieces, each exploring the different elements of the story. So, there could be historical short fiction, faux non-fiction, a telling in Scots and/or Ulster Scots, a real journal of research. How the various parts might come together would only be discovered in the writing...

**11 November 2008**

...I could run a twin-track project: one part would be experimental, with the objective of a non-fiction piece (or collection of related pieces) and the other part would be towards a more traditional 'nineteenth-century novel'. Part of the reflection could be on how one feeds into the other, and how they change each other...

It is clear from these preliminary jottings that I was drawn to an approach that would result in a fragmented narrative producing a kind of anti-narrative. At the same time, and in opposition to this, I have huge admiration for the 'well-made' novel in the nineteenth-century model of Eliot and Gaskell. My approach in this critical commentary will be to examine how the novel took shape, and how my reading of both theory and creative work fed into this process. The

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<sup>4</sup> Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) pp. 97-98.



focus will be on key issues of plot, structure and characterisation, as well as the overarching matter of how I enabled historical fact and creative invention to 'talk' to each other. Chapter Two will consider how other contemporary historical novelists have approached this latter issue, referring particularly to Umberto Eco and Kate Grenville, who have both written reflectively about their creative work. In addition to this I will refer throughout the thesis to other authors of both fiction and non-fiction whose example helped me find ways of bringing the ideas behind *Freethinkers* to life.

Chapter Three will examine my methodology of using primary source materials as an incitement to imagination and character creation, and will illustrate this through an analysis of my use of the various letters and pamphlets generated by Thomas's arrest, trial and execution.

Throughout this critical commentary I will analyse the ways in which research, imagination and memory interact and catalyse each other during the creative process, and in Chapter Four I will examine how this fusion has transformed the story of Thomas Aikenhead from historical fact to historical fiction in *Freethinkers*.

Towards the end of the novel Isobel Carruth says:

'I suppose the best I can do is recount the narrative in my own mind. There is no conclusion, no verdict. I must be satisfied with chronicling the events and nothing more.'

The ambition of this critical commentary is to offer not only a 'narrative verdict' on the development of *Freethinkers*, but also to use a combination of analysis and intuition to understand the impulses that brought it into being.

## Chapter One

### Sex, Drugs and Blasphemy

...the historian must accept responsibility for the construction of what previously he or she had pretended only to discover.  
- Hayden White, *Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties*<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I will explore the historical background to *Freethinkers*, and analyse its treatment in historiography, fiction and drama. Where appropriate I will elaborate on how these treatments have influenced the development of my novel. In keeping with Hayden White's views on the 'created' nature of historical narratives, I have chosen not to segregate the historiographic from the fictional, but rather will consider these writings in chronological order.

It is 1696. King William III is on the throne and the country is at war with France. Only a few months earlier an inquiry into the Glencoe Massacre published its findings, exonerating the King and government and leaving a pervading sense of cover-up. 1696 has been a bad year in Scotland, with the latest in a long line of failed harvests resulting in food shortages and starvation. Strange events are occurring, with huge numbers of seals washed up dead on the east coast and a widely reported episode of witchcraft in Renfrewshire that culminates in six executions the following year. In Edinburgh a terrible fire has destroyed many buildings in the overcrowded Canongate area. Devout believers interpret these events as a sign of God's displeasure, and speculate that perhaps

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<sup>5</sup> Hayden White, 'Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties' in *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) p. 304.

such divine displeasure has been provoked by an outbreak of atheism and freethinking.<sup>6</sup> Religious and secular powers are closely intertwined – several Privy Councillors are clergymen – and before long a censorship committee has been established, and the authorities are investigating bookshops and libraries to find out if they have been stocking unsuitable 'atheistical' publications.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Aikenhead was a student at the University of Edinburgh in the mid-1690s. He had a tendency to show off in front of his friends, describing mad inventions and – more dangerously – making scornful remarks about Christianity. Somehow – it is not known how - his remarks came to the attention of the authorities. It is likely that the informant was one of his circle of friends and acquaintances. The Scottish Presbyterian psyche was conditioned to accept covert denouncement followed by public penance, and the charged atmosphere of the time made such behaviour all the more likely. Indeed, only a month before Thomas's arrest a bookkeeper called John Fraser was prosecuted for blasphemy when his landlord and landlady informed against him. Fraser's sceptical views had emerged as he and his landlord discussed matters of faith – he had made the mistake of assuming that a private conversation would remain private.<sup>8</sup> Thomas claimed that the informant in his case was his friend and fellow student, Mungo Craig – an accusation denied by Mungo himself, but - as

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<sup>6</sup> The OED defines freethinking as 'a person who refuses to submit his or her reason to the control of authority in matters of religious belief.' <http://www.oed.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/view/Entry/74430?redirectedFrom=freethinker&> (accessed 26/7/13). In the period when *Freethinkers* is set it was largely a pejorative term, with the implication of loose morals and a depraved lifestyle.

<sup>7</sup> Michael F. Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) pp. 53-54, 65-72.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

will become evident later in this chapter - believed by most commentators on the case at the time and subsequently.

In November 1696 Thomas was arrested and imprisoned, the indictment stating that he was charged with 'railing against and cursing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and impugning and denying the truth of the Holy Scriptures, and quarrelling and arguing against the being of God...' If found guilty, the recommendation was that the offender 'ought to be punished by death, and the confiscation of your moveables, to the example and terror of others...' <sup>9</sup>

As he awaited trial, Thomas petitioned for the charge to be set aside, claiming to be completely orthodox in his religious beliefs. 'Whatever expressions might have escaped me,' he claimed, 'the same was uttered or expressed by me not as my own private sentiments and opinions, but were repeated by me as sentiments and opinions of some atheistical writers... whose books I did receive from Mungo Craig who is not only insert in the list of witnesses [...] against me, but was the chief and principal instrument who constantly made it his work to interrogate me against my reading.'<sup>10</sup> Thomas was claiming that he had been led astray – that it was Mungo who was the freethinker, not him. If it was indeed Mungo who had informed against Thomas, his action had served only to draw attention to himself and his own beliefs.

The petition was rejected, and while Thomas languished in the Tollbooth Prison, Mungo struck back against him by publishing a pamphlet called *A Satyr*

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<sup>9</sup> T.B. Howell, *A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason. Volume 13* (London, Hansard, 1816) p. 920.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 922.

*Against Atheistical Deism With the Genuine Character of a Deist.*<sup>11</sup> ‘Atheistical Deism’ might seem like an oxymoron to the modern reader, but in this period there was no such contradiction. Whether a freethinker<sup>12</sup> disbelieved entirely or entertained non-traditional notions of God was irrelevant: any deviation from orthodoxy was equally worthy of condemnation.

Thomas’s trial was held on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1696, with Mungo the main prosecution witness. In the record of the trial Mungo claimed he had heard Thomas ‘revile the books of the New Testament, and call them the books of the imposter Jesus Christ.’ Thomas had also dismissed the disciples as ‘blockish ignorant fisher-fellows’ chosen by Jesus for their gullibility. In addition he had said that ‘the Holy Scriptures were stuffed with such contradictions that the stupidity of the world was admirable in having believed them so long.’<sup>13</sup> Mungo’s choice of language and tone are crucial. The law under which Thomas was prosecuted prescribed the death penalty for any who ‘shall rail upon or curse God’. Sober doubt might be tolerated, but outspoken contempt for the tenets of Christianity would not.

The records of the trial give a summary of each witness’s evidence rather than a verbatim account of questions asked and answers given. The other witnesses – mostly fellow students, and all young men – seemed to draw from the same menu of misdeeds recorded in Mungo’s testimony, often repeating exact phrases such as Thomas’s alleged description of religion as ‘a rhapsody of ill-invented nonsense’. The only exception was in the evidence of Patrick

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<sup>11</sup> Mungo Craig, *A Satyr Against Atheistical Deism With the Genuine Character of a Deist* (Edinburgh: Robert Hutchison, 1696).

<sup>12</sup> Graham suggests that the terms ‘atheist’ and ‘deist’ were almost interchangeable at this period, although deists (who believed in God but not in revealed religion) would have rejected the accusation of atheism.

<sup>13</sup> T.B. Howell, *State Trials...* p. 926.

Middleton, who added that Thomas had claimed the biblical Book of Revelation was 'an alchemy book for finding out the philosopher's stone.'<sup>14</sup> There is no record of Thomas offering any defence, or having any representation, but it has been suggested that the existence of his petition hints that he did have some sort of legal advice. Whether he did or not, it made little difference. On Christmas Eve the jury found him guilty, and sentenced him to death.

Christmas 1696 must have been a sombre one in the city of Edinburgh, as Thomas waited out the two weeks between his conviction and execution. At times he claimed to be repentant, although some were sceptical of his sincerity, including Mungo himself who went to visit Thomas in prison. When the various petitions for clemency were rejected Thomas requested a stay of execution, 'that I may have the opportunity of conversing with godly ministers, and by their assistance be more prepared for an eternal rest.'<sup>15</sup> The request was denied.

On the morning of January 8<sup>th</sup> 1697 Thomas made the journey from the Tollbooth Prison to the Gallowlee, which was situated on the road from Edinburgh to Leith. He had prepared a long speech, but eyewitness reports from the execution indicate that he became rambling and confused as he tried to read it out on the scaffold: hardly surprising under the circumstances. Luckily he had had the foresight to write down and make several copies of it, which he enclosed in a final letter to his friends and asked them to circulate. The battle between Craig and himself had become a sort of publication war, which would continue after his death.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp. 923-925.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 928.

From Mungo's point of view the key sentence came near the end of the speech. Thomas said, 'I cannot, without doing myself a manifest injury, but vindicate my innocence from these abominable aspersions in a printed satyr of Mr Mungo Craig's... whom I leave to reckon with God and his own conscience if he was not as deeply concerned in those hellish notions as ever I was.'<sup>16</sup> We do not know if Thomas actually managed to declare this particular statement from the gallows, but thanks to the copies of his speech, this accusation must soon have been common knowledge throughout the city. Mungo had no doubt hoped that Thomas's early accusations against him had been wiped from the public memory, but this final speech would have brought them to the fore again.

This put Mungo in a no-win situation. How could he conduct an argument with a dead man? More pressingly, how could he refute the accusation of atheism? He responded in the only way he knew, and published another pamphlet, exactly a week after Thomas's execution: *A Lye is no Scandal, or a Vindication of Mr Mungo Craig from a Ridiculous Calumny cast upon him by T. A. who was Executed for Apostacy at Edinburgh, the 8<sup>th</sup> January 1697*.<sup>17</sup>

After this point Mungo disappears from the record. The only hint as to what might have happened to him is a passing mention in the 1876 *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* suggesting that he 'may have cast his lot among the Presbyterian settlers in the North of Ireland'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.933.

<sup>17</sup> Mungo Craig, *A Lye is No Scandal* (Edinburgh: unknown publisher, 1697).

<sup>18</sup> A number of articles in the published proceedings of the Society are reproductions of historical letters, with the addition of a commentary from a member of the Society. In this case the letter is to the Laird of Wishaw, dated June 1697, and concerns the Aikenhead case. The annotations are by David Laing. His speculation about Mungo Craig's fate is made in a footnote to the article.



The main primary sources for the story of Thomas's trial and execution are the court records of the trial itself, Mungo's two pamphlets and Thomas's *cygnea cantio* or swan song – the long statement he wrote on the eve of his execution. Thomas's story attracted a degree of interest at the time, and while the events could scarcely be described as a *cause célèbre*, they did motivate the liberal thinker John Locke to collect copies of the key documents pertaining to the case. These are among Locke's papers in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and this archive has been the main source used by historians until fairly recently. There is no firm evidence on Locke's opinion of the case, but it may be assumed that as a man of heterodox religious beliefs (albeit no advocate of atheism) he might have had some sympathy with Thomas. The papers include a number of private letters and memoirs from Edinburgh residents recounting Thomas's downfall, and these reflect a range of views. One Privy Councillor who visited Thomas in prison described him as both 'an anomaly, and monster of nature,' and 'not vicious, and extremely studious'.<sup>19</sup> There were also passing mentions of the trial and execution in London newspapers of the period, such as *The Post Man* and *The Protestant Mercury*.<sup>20</sup> Thanks to the nineteenth-century passion for history the record of Thomas's trial, along with his petitions and the contemporary commentaries, were all reproduced in T. B. Howell's *Complete Collection of State Trials*, published in 1816.

The flurry of written responses to Thomas's trial and execution subsided within a few months of his death. The first real narrativisation of the tale did not

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<sup>19</sup> T.B. Howell pp. 929-930.

<sup>20</sup> On 16<sup>th</sup> January 1697 *The Post Man* reported that on the day of Thomas's execution he was escorted to the gallows by two lines of fusiliers, and 'died with all the Marks of a true Penitent.'

emerge until 1855, when Macaulay wrote a charged account of the execution in Volume IV of his *History of England*. In this telling Thomas is depicted as a sacrificial lamb slaughtered by an inflexible and benighted Kirk. Macaulay describes Thomas's execution in emotive terms: '...the preachers who were the boy's murderers crowded round him at the gallows, and, while he was struggling in the last agony, insulted Heaven with prayers more blasphemous than anything he ever uttered.'<sup>21</sup> This version of Thomas has persisted, and informs the summarised retellings that appear on current atheist, agnostic and humanist websites.

The notion of Thomas as victim of a state-sponsored crime prevails in a rare prose fiction treatment of the story. *Who Murdered Aikenhead?*<sup>22</sup> was written by Detroit lawyer Henry C. Bogle, and published in 1973 by Harlo Press, which appears to have been the now-defunct vanity publishing arm of a printing company.

*Who Murdered Aikenhead?* is clearly the work of a novice fiction writer, and this has proved to be helpful to me. The author's naive strategies to manage the difficulties of the story highlighted some challenges I also encountered in transforming historical fact into fiction. Bogle developed his own methods, as detailed below, and while they often fall short, they do prompt reflection on *why* they don't work, and *how* they could be bettered.

Bogle makes extensive use of the primary sources such as Howell's *State Trials* and Mungo Craig's two pamphlets. In the early part of the novel he imagines the gathering where Thomas ridicules religion, incorporating many of

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, 3 vols [1849-55] (London: J. M. Dent, 1905), iii, p. 510.

<sup>22</sup> Henry C. Bogle, *Who Murdered Aikenhead?* (Detroit: Harlo Press, 1973).

the phrases used in the indictment and in the witnesses' courtroom evidence. The courtroom scene itself is a line-by-line dramatisation of the record published in Howell, and Bogle's version suggests that the practice was to read out each witness's statement in court asking him to confirm or deny each point. This approach demonstrates a worthy regard for the facts, and also highlights the shortcomings of over-reliance on written sources. The account of the trial in Howell's *State Trials* is not a verbatim record, but rather a reproduction of witness statements. Other cases reported in *State Trials* follow the same format. In all examples the wording suggests that these statements were summaries of the answers given at an earlier private cross-examination. Whatever the truth of the matter, reproducing the court statements in their entirety broken up with brief passages of connecting narrative results in a dreary read. A legal document has its own particular register, and can rarely be turned into compelling dialogue. However authentic Bogle's representation of the trial was, it was not convincing. Reflecting on Bogle's approach, it seemed to me that I should not be manacled to the printed record. I thought back to an earlier time in my life when I was a member of an amateur dramatics group. The breakthrough (such as it was) in the development of my craft as an actor was the realisation that I must play each character as if she were saying her words for the first time, as if she hadn't known until she opened her mouth what was going to come out. Applying this approach to *Freethinkers*, I had to read and internalise the written record, but then I had to put it to one side and let the characters think and speak with the freshness of 'live' conversation.

It was important to me that in *Freethinkers* the court scene would be dynamic and have an in-built drama – not merely the sort of 'snap on' tension

that Bogle attempts with exclamations such as: '[Thomas] could not restrain himself as the barefaced innuendo issued from the Advocate's lips. "No! No!" he cried, springing to his feet, his body quivering with anger.'<sup>23</sup>

Of course, there is a gulf between the reality of a court case and the heightened versions we see represented on television and in film, so my challenge was to keep to the truth of the events while creating something with a convincing sense of jeopardy. I will discuss the strategies I used to try and achieve this in Chapter Four. *Who Murdered Aikenhead?* is heavily expository. The opening chapter sees Thomas's fictional love interest, Mary Reid, fill in the back-story and give a potted review of Edinburgh politics while in conversation with him a few days before his arrest. Another chapter consists almost entirely of Thomas's fictional lawyer Sir Emil Reid (Mary Reid's father) explaining the intricacies of the blasphemy laws. Many writers of historical fiction introduce invented characters into the factual events they recount, for a variety of motives. Used well they can be effective devices for exposition, but in this case Sir Emil and Mary never become anything more than mechanisms for conveying historical information to the reader.

George Rosie's play *The Blasphemer*<sup>24</sup> was first performed in Edinburgh in November 1990 and published with one of his other plays two years later. Thomas Aikenhead's story is recounted in flashback by the Reverend Meldrum, minister at the Tron Kirk. In Rosie's telling, it is Meldrum who informs on Aikenhead, after the younger man belittles religion in a late-night argument on

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<sup>23</sup> Bogle, *Who Murdered Aikenhead?* p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> George Rosie, *Carluccio and the Queen of Hearts & The Blasphemer* (Edinburgh: Chapman Publications, 1992).

the steps of the Kirk. When Meldrum realises that Thomas has been indicted under the draconian 1661 Blasphemy Act, and will therefore face the death penalty, he attempts to undo the damage by supporting Thomas's petitions to the court. Politicians, in the shape of the Lord Advocate James Stuart and the Chancellor Sir Patrick Hume of Polwarth, are determined to execute Thomas in order to placate the powerful and demanding Kirk faction. Mungo plays a minor part in the drama, and Rosie has invented a sweetheart for Thomas who eventually becomes Meldrum's embittered housekeeper. The play ends with Meldrum's death, when the ghost of Thomas meets him and escorts him to the afterlife in a mood of reconciliation and forgiveness.

There are several important areas where the play does not entirely succeed as a piece of theatre. It is not my intention to embark upon a detailed literary critique, but rather to examine these issues as a way of highlighting some of the difficulties presented by the source material – difficulties I too have wrestled with in the writing of *Freethinkers*. As with *Who Killed Aikenhead?* the difficulty arises from developing the chronology of events and the *dramatis personae* into a coherent work of fiction, with a causality that has drama, and convincingly motivated characters. The issue of character motivation does not only apply to Thomas and Mungo, but also to those in authority who pursued the prosecution. In Chapters Three and Four I will discuss some of the strategies I experimented with in order to solve these problems.

In 1992 Professor Michael Hunter, an expert in Early Modern History of Science, addressed the story of Thomas's downfall in *Atheism from the*

*Reformation to the Enlightenment*,<sup>25</sup> which he co-edited. His essay, *Aikenhead the Atheist*, is a thorough articulation of the story, including the range of contemporary responses to it as represented in the London newspapers and in private correspondence and journals. Hunter's focus is on ideas, and the essay identifies Thomas's beliefs and disbeliefs as an outworking of the 'articulate irreligion' which had filtered from Europe through to English and Scottish universities by means of the writings of Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes and others. The essay also investigates how 'blasphemy' was understood as both a legal and theological concept at the time, and seeks to understand why the authorities responded with such vehemence to Thomas's crime.

The most recent and most comprehensive investigation of the events leading up to and following Thomas's execution is *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the Enlightenment* by the American academic Michael F. Graham. Graham takes a quite different approach from Hunter, situating Thomas's story in the politics and mood of late seventeenth century Edinburgh. He delves into the archives to build as full a picture as possible of Thomas's family background. As Justin Champion says in *Reviews in History*:

This is detailed and archivally informed historical writing – exploiting parish, judicial, ecclesiastical and private papers Graham delivers a textured sense of the tense atmosphere riven by a bustling and

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Hunter, "'Aikenhead the Atheist': The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century', in Michael Hunter and David Wootton (eds), *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 221-54.

intellectually robust university and the assumptions of a civic society which assumed the rightness of divine punishment for public sins.<sup>26</sup>

So there is clearly something in the Thomas Aikenhead story that has attracted writers and academics sporadically over the years. However, for some reason the resulting fictional narratives never quite take flight. The story has many elements that should make for a compelling tale – betrayal, religious fanaticism and an attractive and idealistic young man as its hero. Perhaps one of the reasons that neither Bogle's nor Rosie's versions succeed is that they have opted to portray Thomas's persecutors as one-dimensional, Machiavellian baddies, and the resulting works are anti-clerical polemics. It seemed to me that if *Freethinkers* was to succeed as a piece of literary fiction I would have to take a more nuanced approach to both the characterisation and the religious aspect of the novel.

As I researched the facts around Thomas's story I encountered an intriguing prelude to the events of 1696/7. In April 1682 a young gentlewoman called Elizabeth Edmonstone was summoned to appear before the Privy Council in Edinburgh. She was accused of giving a female servant a sweetmeat that was in fact a poisonous tablet reputed to 'work strange wanton affections and humours in the bodies of women.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Professor Justin Champion, review of *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead. Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the Enlightenment*, (review no. 781)

URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/781>

Date accessed: 20 October, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, third series, 16 vols (Edinburgh: HM General Register House, 1908-), 7, pp. 389-90.

It transpired that the aphrodisiac was the brainchild of James Aikenhead – Thomas's father. Aikenhead senior was an Edinburgh apothecary, and according to the Privy Council records a male servant came to his shop and bought some of the tablets, acting on the orders of Elizabeth Edmonstone, daughter of the Laird of Duntreath. She gave the aphrodisiac to a female servant called Jonet Stewart, telling her it was a sweetmeat. Jonet became dangerously feverish, suffering for twenty days before the intervention of a Dr Irvine [sometimes spelt 'Irving'] saved her life.<sup>28</sup>

It is unclear from the records who took the decision to pursue a prosecution in this matter. Jonet Stewart was a servant in the house of William Dundas, an advocate. We can perhaps assume that then – as now – it was not a good idea to get on the wrong side of a lawyer. Mr Dundas may have taken exception to the poisoning of his servant, and determined to call the perpetrator to account. Regardless of who was the driving force, Elizabeth, the hapless male servant and James Aikenhead appeared before the Privy Council. They were found 'guilty of an open and manifest crime' and deserving of being 'exemplarily punished'.<sup>29</sup> The case was passed over to the Royal College of Physicians for further investigation. The outcome of their enquiries remains unclear, but whatever their punishment was, it did not appear to damage Elizabeth's prospects: five years later she was married to James Montgomery of Greyabbey, a member of one of the most prominent and wealthy planter families in Ulster. They went on to have nine children. James Aikenhead seems to have come off the worst of all the guilty parties involved in the case. Within a year of the trial

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<sup>28</sup> David Laing (ed.), *Historical Notices of Scottish Affairs Selected from the Manuscripts of Sir John Lauder of Fountainhall*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Bannantyne Club, 1848), 1, p. 343.

<sup>29</sup> *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, p. 390.



he was dead, bequeathing nothing but debts to his widow and children. At the time of Thomas's birth the Aikenheads had been a relatively prosperous and well-connected family, but an appetite for litigation combined with bad luck and bad judgement took their toll on the family fortunes. A few months after her husband's death Thomas's mother was imprisoned for debt and died soon after her release, leaving Thomas an orphan at around the age of ten.

The aphrodisiac episode may not be of great historical significance – it is very much a 'small narrative' - but it attracted me as being full of possibilities for the fiction writer. There is the unanswered question of Elizabeth Edmonstone's motivation in giving the aphrodisiac to Jonet Stewart. More than that, the events opened a door into Thomas's family background, and also into the litigious and contentious milieu of middle-to-upper-class Edinburgh in the 1680s. It is clear from the court case that an advocate such as Dundas was comfortable with taking the daughter of a Laird to law, and that members of the medical profession were unafraid to join in, particularly if it allowed them to remind apothecaries of their place in the pecking order. This was a time when professions were jostling for status – the Royal College of Physicians had been granted its charter<sup>30</sup> only the year before - and the political upheavals of the era had left many gentry families stripped of their property. Edinburgh's crowded conditions meant it was in many ways a socially integrated space, with

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<sup>30</sup> The charter established the status and independence of the Royal College. According to the current charter 'King Charles the Second by Royal Charter dated the 29th day of November 1681 and afterwards ratified by an Act of the Scottish Parliament dated the 16th day of June 1685 constituted the several persons therein named and their successors to be chosen as therein mentioned a body corporate and politic by the name of 'The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh', with perpetual succession and with the powers therein set forth.' Royal College of Physicians website <http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/about/charter.php> (accessed 29/5/13).

aristocracy living cheek by jowl with more humble citizens. The education system was accessible – albeit to boys only - in a way that seems positively modern in its egalitarianism. There is a sense of a society that was seething with possibilities, but at the same time one that was socially perilous to navigate.

In spite of – or perhaps because of - the plethora of material about Thomas Aikenhead, I struggled to find a way to begin writing his story. Therefore I decided to try a tangential approach to get going, and write a short story based on the aphrodisiac episode from the point of view of Dr Irvine. At that stage I had only the sketchiest of details about him – his name, and his role in saving Jonet Stewart's life. The fictional version of Dr Irvine who emerged was young, ambitious and upwardly mobile, but with a painful sensitivity to the nuances of class and status. He proved to be very different to the historical Dr Irvine I eventually encountered in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. At the time of the aphrodisiac incident the historical Dr Irvine was middle-aged, successful and very much an establishment figure in Edinburgh. Faced with the discrepancies between my invention and the real man, I opted to transform my character into the entirely invented Dr Carruth. The historical Dr Irvine still features in the novel, but in a role more in keeping with the known historical facts.

Edinburgh was a small city – Poll Tax records from a decade later show there were 33 Doctors of Medicine, 36 advocates and 19 apothecaries<sup>31</sup> – and it was taut with the religious and political tensions of the 'Killing Time'. Although much of the violence took place in the countryside of southwest Scotland the

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<sup>31</sup> Helen M. Dingwall, *Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries: Medical Practice in Seventeenth-Century Edinburgh* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1995), p. 25.

effects were evident in Edinburgh, most graphically in the numerous executions of Covenanters that were carried out in the Grassmarket. Many landowners kept second homes in the city, so if they fell foul of the anti-Covenanter laws – as Elizabeth Edmonstone's father did<sup>32</sup> – news of property confiscations, imprisonment and exile would have spread through the middle and upper classes. The choice between faith and pragmatism was real and unavoidable for many citizens, and it is remarkable how many of them sacrificed their secular wellbeing rather than compromise their principles. No doubt there were times when scores could be settled via the courts: it is worth noting that as a young man Dr Irvine was expelled from the University of Edinburgh for refusing to sign the 1638 national covenant, and later imprisoned for a short while. He was a life-long royalist, attending the camp of Charles II at Atholl in the run up to the Battle of Worcester in 1651.<sup>33</sup> We also know that there was professional rivalry between physicians and apothecaries,<sup>34</sup> so perhaps Dr Irvine would have had an interest in bringing the case to the attention of the Privy Council.

As I wrote the short story based on the aphrodisiac incident I allowed the mood of the time to feed into the creation of the six-year-old Thomas, who Dr Carruth encounters while seeking the cause of Jonet Stewart's illness. My

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<sup>32</sup> According to the Edmonstone family website, Elizabeth's father – like most of the Edmonstone family – was a staunch Presbyterian, and was imprisoned in 1667 for the capital offence of allowing a Covenanter clergyman to preach on the family property at Duntreath, Stirlingshire. He was eventually released, although his health had been damaged by his ordeal, and he spent much of his time subsequently at the family's Ulster property, Redhall, near Carrickfergus. He died in 1688 while fighting on the Williamite side at the siege of Derry. [<http://www.edmonstone.com> Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> October 2012].

<sup>33</sup> Helen M. Dingwall, 'Irvine, Christopher (c.1620–1693)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14466>, accessed 21 Oct 2012].

<sup>34</sup> Dingwall, *Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries*, pp. 216-22.

objective was to develop a character who would fizz with energy and curiosity, absorbing the *zeitgeist* with all the hunger of a precociously bright child. These attributes would ultimately lead to his undoing. This short story grew to such an extent that it changed my whole idea for the finished novel, and provided the basis for Part I, *The Fabric of the Human Body*. The story of Thomas's downfall and its aftermath is told over Part II, *The Trial of Thomas Aikenhead*, and Part III, *Anatomy of an Accusation*.

When I began to write *Freethinkers* I was presented with a number of challenges: how to shape a series of real events into a compelling narrative; how to transform people known only from a few scraps of history into convincing characters; how to balance respect for the facts with the desire for a story. In short, to produce a novel that would be honest, even if not entirely faithful to the facts. The next step was to look at the work of other contemporary authors of fact-based historical fiction to see how they had approached the task.

## Chapter Two

### Current Approaches to Writing Historical Literary Fiction

Books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told.

- Umberto Eco, *Postscript to 'The Name of the Rose'*<sup>35</sup>

Historical fiction, in all its forms, is judged to have many shortcomings. Those novels deemed 'guilty pleasures' (tales of military derring-do for the men, Regency romances for the women) are condemned as escapist, politically complacent, and confirmatory of gender stereotypes. At the other end of the spectrum, postmodern historical metafiction such as the novels of John Fowles are accused of being narcissistic, and unduly absorbed by surface and formal cleverness. Even in the middle ground of literary historical fiction, authors like Hilary Mantel are criticised for focusing her creative powers on the past in order to avoid the unmanageable present.<sup>36</sup> Literary historical fiction of the past three decades has been observed by Jerome de Groot to have 'folded various tropes of formal, historiographical and theoretical radicalism into a newly

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<sup>35</sup> Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Novelist Amanda Craig was one of several commentators moved to criticise historical fiction as a genre in response to extensive media coverage of *Wolf Hall*. Writing in the aftermath of the novel's Booker win she grudgingly admitted the quality of literary historical novels such as those by Hilary Mantel, A.S. Byatt and Sarah Waters. It was not the writing *per se* she objected to, but rather the genre itself: 'For pastiche, really, is what almost all historical fiction is. It is a book made up of other books, not lives that are witnessed and investigated.' *The Independent* (13 April 2009) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/stuck-in-the-past-why-is-modern-literature-obsessed-with-history-1667709.html> (accessed 29/5/13).

popular, relatively sanitised blend.<sup>37</sup> It has been criticised as being formally and politically conservative, with the suggestion that novels by authors such as Ian McEwan, Rose Tremain and Sebastian Faulks 'take the tools of postmodern historiographic metafiction' - such as non-linear chronology and multiple and/or unreliable narrators - 'and make them mainstream' (p. 100).

Of course, there have always been counter-arguments to these criticisms. Dig beneath the surface of most 'guilty pleasure' novels, and you will find acute, well-researched representations of class and gender struggle. Even the most pretentious postmodern historical metafiction is acknowledging with some sincerity the unknowability of the past and the unreliability of narrative: at its best the imitative approach of postmodern fiction can give voice to marginalised groups or individuals. Almost all works of historical fiction find that the past has something to say to the present, and I would argue that the 'sanitised blend' de Groot identifies is more accurately represented as postmodernism with a human touch.

What most critics of historical fiction overlook is that writers find themselves drawn to a particular period or event, and that is why they choose to write about it. It is not through a wilful refusal to engage with the present, but rather that the past has engaged their imagination in a way that contemporary life has not. This chapter focuses on two contemporary authors who have produced companion non-fiction texts for their novels: Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*, and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and *Searching for The Secret River*. I will consider how these

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<sup>37</sup> Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 93.

‘texts of poetics’ on the roles of research, imagination and memory assisted me as I worked on *Freethinkers*.

Since the time of Scott many writers of historical fiction have prefaced or concluded their novels with reflective, explanatory commentaries. This may be no more than an Author’s Note or Afterword identifying which characters and events are ‘real’, and which are invented, but can also be a substantial text. A more recent trend is the inclusion of a bibliography, as if the author feels compelled to establish his or her intellectual *bona fides*. Several established novelists – such as Eco and Grenville - have written extensively on the motivation, process and method by which their novels were produced.

Sometimes this accompanying text is an informal gathering of articles and interviews, but it can also take the form of a freestanding book, complete with source material, visual images, bibliography and a narrative that examines the evolution of the original novel. Are these parallel texts a sign of defensiveness or of enthusiasm? Or perhaps nothing more than a manifestation of the author's desire to continue the conversation with his or her readers?

*The Name of the Rose* is a self-consciously theoretical novel, which is hardly surprising when we consider that Eco is a renowned expert in semiotics. The novel is a dense intertextual blend of medieval murder mystery, theological argument and postmodern playfulness. The book's narrator, the elderly monk Adso, recalls events that unfolded in 1327, when he was an eighteen-year-old novice assisting with an investigation into suspected heresy at a remote Benedictine monastery.

Writing a work of fiction poses a particular challenge for someone like Eco, who is a theoretician first and a creative writer second. In *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, he admits: 'I was embarrassed at telling a story. I felt like a drama critic who suddenly exposes himself behind the footlights and finds himself watched by those who, until then, have been his accomplices in the seats out front.' (p. 19)

Many writers face this problem from the other end: the writing comes before the analysis. For some the attempt to contextualise work is somewhat at odds with the free-flowing, random and subconscious nature of the creative process: we view theory as a lens with which to examine a piece of completed work rather than a foundation upon which the work is built. However, in *Postscript* Eco gives some useful examples of how he uses the theoretical approach as a tool to solve particular problems. Theory becomes an enabler, rather than an inhibitor. One example of this is in his consideration of plot in a novel. As he points out:

Unquestionably, the modern novel has sought to diminish amusement resulting from the plot in order to enhance other kinds of amusement. As a great admirer of Aristotle's *Poetics*, I have always thought that, no matter what, a novel must also – especially – amuse through its plot.  
(p. 60)

So, how does a postmodern writer like Eco provide his readers with a satisfying plot, without venturing into what is – to him – the unacceptable realm of escapism? He concludes that plot can 'be found also in the form of quotation



of other plots, and the quotation could be less escapist than the plot quoted.'

(p.65)

Eco's thinking offers an argument in favour of plot while usefully addressing any anxieties about its perceived 'artificiality'. His solution is admirably simple: use plot, by all means, but use it knowingly. Use someone else's plot, and call it intertextuality. An example of this occurs early in *The Name of the Rose* when Adso's mentor, William of Baskerville, uses deductive powers to assist a party of monks in finding the Abbot's runaway horse, Brunellus, in an episode appropriated from Voltaire's *Zadig*.<sup>38</sup> The same episode also demonstrates that not only plot can be quoted: genre can too. Readers familiar with the works of Conan Doyle cannot miss the Holmesian tone of William of Baskerville's detection, or even the heavy hint in his name. In *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* one short chapter is titled 'The Detective Metaphysic'. Eco explains that his novel is constructed as a mystery in order to echo the physical mystery of the labyrinth that sits at the heart of the unnamed monastery where the action takes place. He adopts the tropes of crime fiction – including the central 'detective' figure of William – while playfully admitting 'this is a mystery in which very little is discovered and the detective is defeated.' (p. 54)

Eco does his best to maintain a rational, dispassionate tone in *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*. We get the distinct impression that he doesn't hold with mystifying the creative process. However, every so often we get a glimpse of what really drove him to write the novel: his passion for all things Medieval. He

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<sup>38</sup> Martha D. Rust remarks that this episode 'borrows unabashedly from Voltaire's *Zadig*'.

*The Architecture of the Infinite Library: teaching intertextuality and bibliography with 'The Name of the Rose',*

<http://genderandsexuality.as.nyu.edu/docs/10/969/Architecture.pdf>  
[Accessed 4/11/12].

describes himself as a 'medievalist in hibernation,' and goes on to explain: 'I know the present only through the television screen, whereas I have a direct knowledge of the Middle Ages.' (p. 14) And later: 'The Middle Ages have remained if not my profession, my hobby – and a constant temptation: I see the period everywhere, transparently overlaying my daily concerns, which do not look medieval, though they are.' (p. 18)

These comments go to the heart of the inciting impulse of Eco's novel. The theoretical tools he uses to build the book may be cerebral, but the original motivation for writing it had an emotional basis in his desire to immerse himself in his favourite historical era. This suggests to me two key points. Firstly, that the theoretical framework should support and enable the work, not curtail or dictate it. And secondly, that every novel needs to be generated and fuelled by some sort of passion or obsession.

These have been helpful considerations for me as I worked on *Freethinkers*. In the introduction to this critical commentary I wrote about trying to identify why Thomas Aikenhead's story appealed to me, and it seems to me that the reasons for this go to the heart of *my* inciting impulses: the desire to examine faith and loss of faith; an interest in the literalist Protestant heritage from which I spring; a fascination with the dangers of friendship. Eco's 'quotation' of genre also fed into the development of *Freethinkers* as I attempted to wrestle unruly historical evidence into a narrative. The facts of the story had already presented me with two court cases – the first in 1681, when Thomas's father was among the accused, and the second in 1696 when Thomas stood trial. Of course, a court case is the postscript to a crime: what I decided to do was make Parts 1 and 3 of *Freethinkers* 'mysteries', with a detective-style figure pursuing the

truth. In Part 1 Dr Robert Carruth was racing against time to find the cause of Jonet Stewart's life-threatening illness, and then hunting the unknown perpetrators. In Part 3 Isobel Carruth conducted her own moral inquest, trying to understand what - and who - had led to Thomas's death. The historical Thomas was also a detective of sorts, sifting through the evidence in search of the truth about the existence or otherwise of God. In his gallows speech he said 'It is a principle innate and co-natural to every man to bare an insatiable inclination to truth, and to seek for it as for hid treasure.' For him the search was fruitless. He continued, '...the more I thought thereon, the further I was from finding the verity I desired.'<sup>39</sup> Like William of Baskerville, he discovers very little, and is ultimately defeated.

Eco says in *Postscript*, 'the fundamental question of philosophy (like that of psychoanalysis) is the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty?' (p. 54). In my novel, both Robert and Isobel find that their investigations ultimately confront them with their own culpability. In *Postscript* Eco goes on to say, 'Every story of investigation and of conjecture tells us something that we have always been close to knowing' (p. 54). Robert and Isobel do at least reach the end of *Freethinkers* with a greater knowledge of themselves and each other.

Australian author Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* is the story of William Thornhill, a Thames waterman whose death sentence for theft is commuted to transportation to Australia in 1806.<sup>40</sup> The focus of the novel is

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<sup>39</sup> T.B. Howell, *State Trials...* p. 931.

<sup>40</sup> *The Secret River* and its non-fiction companion *Searching for the Secret River* are of particular interest to Creative Writing students, as versions of these

Thornhill's actions and thoughts as he establishes his own 'hundred acres' of property on land already inhabited by a group of nomadic Aboriginal families. Grenville is clear-eyed about the immorality and injustice of the colonisers' treatment of the indigenous people of the country. However, Thornhill's character and experiences are portrayed with skill and empathy, so that the reader can understand his actions.

The novel is dedicated 'to the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future'. In the acknowledgements Grenville mentions that 'One of my ancestors gave me the basis for certain details of the early life of William Thornhill...'<sup>41</sup> We, the readers, can join the dots, and identify key themes of post-colonial guilt and expiation.

*The Secret River* was first published in Australia in 2005, and *Searching for the Secret River* followed the next year. This second book is very different to Eco's *Postscript*. It demonstrates little or no interest in theory, and is much closer to the reflective commentary that most of us are familiar with from Creative Writing undergraduate and postgraduate courses. What the book does share with Eco's *Postscript* is the identification of Grenville's inciting impulse, but in *Searching for the Secret River* this is foregrounded. Right at the start she recalls the family stories about her great-great-great grandfather, Solomon Wiseman – a transported convict who transformed himself into a wealthy landowner in New South Wales, and was rumoured to have murdered his wife by pushing her down the stairs. This slice of family history segues into Grenville's experience of taking part in a 'Reconciliation Walk' across Sydney

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texts formed Grenville's doctoral award (2006) from the University of Technology Sydney.

<sup>41</sup> Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006 [Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2005]) p. 351.

Harbour Bridge in 2000. The walk was a gesture of figurative bridge-building between black and white Australians. Grenville met the gaze of an Aboriginal woman, but the moment of connection gave way to the realisation of what Grenville's ancestor might have done to the Aboriginal woman's ancestors. As she puts it: 'When you were a white Australian, investigating your own history could lead you into some murky territory.'<sup>42</sup>

She realises that the 'Reconciliation Walk' is in many ways an empty gesture, a well-meaning attempt to address the past: 'The imagery of our walk, across a bridge, suddenly seemed all too easy. We were strolling towards reconciliation – what I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history.' (p. 13)

Grenville's discomfort with the 'empty gesture' speaks to my own reservations about aspects of post-conflict Northern Ireland, specifically the 'Peace and Reconciliation' sector which presumes that the wounds of the recent past can be healed by creative workshops and public art. The 'deep water of our history' that Grenville plunges into in *The Secret River* is a more personal history to her than *Freethinkers* is to me, and yet in both cases our turning to the past is the very opposite of a retreat from the present. We are both delving into histories that have left their mark on our contemporary worlds.

Grenville sets out to write a non-fiction book about Solomon Wiseman, her great-great-great grandfather. She diligently researches the archives in Australia, and takes advantage of a trip to London to seek out parish registers and court records, and to make location visits to piece together the fragments of

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<sup>42</sup> Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007 [Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006]) p. 20.

Wiseman's life and times. However, she quickly discovers that: 'Human beings were slipperier than the ones I was familiar with on the page: the creatures of fiction. This was the muddle of real life.' (p. 84)

As she writes up the facts, she struggles with the challenge of turning archival material into something more vivid and arresting. She gives in to the impulse to fill in the gaps in the story with imagined episodes and motivations. The urge to shape a narrative is almost irresistible, but she struggles with the sense that by 'interposing a layer of invention' she will defeat her objective of telling 'the unvarnished truth'. (p. 146)

At this point she is at that stage of the writing process where she has caught the scent of a story, but hasn't yet found a shape for it. She appropriates an approach she remembers from her time working on *cinema vérité* documentaries, and writes individual episodes without any clear idea of what the overarching story will be. Some of these episodes are factual accounts, and others are invention or dramatisation. When she comes to 'find the story' from these assembled fragments she encounters a problem:

I was determined to write a book of non-fiction, but the only parts of this 'assembly' that were interesting were the 'flights of fancy' where I'd created the flesh to put on the bones of research. Where, in a word, I'd written fiction. (p. 154)

Grenville realises that the facts of the story are standing in the way of the narrative she wants to create. Worse than that, they are distracting her from

another, more important story: ‘...the larger one of what happened when white met black on the edge of settlement across the country.’ (p.120)

Grenville decides that she has been blocking the story by her attachment to the facts, and – conversely – by her tendency to embroider the family tales of Solomon Wiseman. The ‘small’ story – the personal one – is impeding the ‘big’ one – the political story of colonialism in Australia.

Her strategy is to allow her fictionalising impulse to take over. She lets Wiseman step out of the story, and in his place comes the invented character, William Thornhill. He inherits many elements of Wiseman's life – the London upbringing, the trade as a Thames waterman, the crime and transportation, the slow rise to prosperity. Grenville finds the freedom to explore the big, political theme of the novel through this new, imaginary character. In many ways this echoes my own experience in writing *Freethinkers* when I allowed my original version of the historical figure of Dr Irvine to be reincarnated as the wholly fictional Dr Carruth. I suspect Grenville felt some inhibition about attributing invented emotions and actions to her long-dead ancestor, and I share this reserve: there are surely ethical implications in forcing words into the mouths of people who really did exist, even if they have been dead for two or three hundred years. Grenville depopulates *The Secret River* of all real historical characters, but this was not an approach I emulated. The authenticity of Thomas Aikenhead's life story seemed to me to be key to the credibility of the broader themes addressed in *Freethinkers*, such as faith, loss of faith and intellectual oppression. I will discuss the ethical concerns about ‘inventing’ a real person in the next chapter.

In conclusion, it is illuminating to contrast the different approaches Eco and Grenville take to their 'texts of poetics', and to speculate on what answer these works give to the question raised in the title of this critical commentary. Eco favours a logical, 'problem-solving' approach that is determinedly rational, whereas Grenville advocates a more organic, intuitive method. Faced with a problem of plot or characterisation Eco turns to theory, while Grenville walks, reads and does exploratory, generative writing. I was interested in my own response to these two approaches. My methods are much closer to Grenville's than Eco's, and it was reassuring to read her account of how she had to both search for her story and 'wait' for it. She is acutely aware of how the past infiltrates the present and – in the world of fiction at least – vice versa. This sensitivity assisted my own thinking about enabling my own experience and memories to cast a particular light on the past. At the same time I found Eco's attitude bracing and liberating – and it did perhaps chime with my resistance to the notion of creative writing as some sort of mystical process. It was useful to regard writing problems as just that – technical hitches that have a technical solution, rather than a source of creative angst. Quotation of plot, or of generic tropes, is an elegant and pragmatic methodology. Eco's words provided the epigraph to this chapter, and the idea that 'books always speak of other books' rebuts the contention that historical fiction is a uniquely second-hand genre. Historical novels may well be 'books made up of other books',<sup>43</sup> but no more so than any work of fact or fiction.

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<sup>43</sup> Amanda Craig, *ibid.*



### Chapter Three

#### Necromancy for beginners: a writers' guide to talking to the dead

We engage in acts of fiction-making every time we recount an event from our pasts.

- Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light: The new science of memory*<sup>44</sup>

In the course of this chapter I will identify and analyse the ways in which I have used research, imagination and memory to develop the main characters in *Freethinkers*: both those based on real historical people, like Thomas Aikenhead and Mungo Craig, and those who are entirely invented, such as Robert and Isobel Carruth.

The notion of necromancy – communicating with the dead as a means of uncovering hidden knowledge - captures some of the essence of creating fictional characters from the past. Listening and talking to them is a key step towards reincarnating them, and in the case of real people like Thomas and Mungo that conversation begins with examining the records they left behind, and attempting an imaginative reconstruction from the fragments. The approach with invented characters is only a little different. They may spring from a real person, as Dr Carruth sprang from Dr Irvine, or be invented from scratch, like Isobel. In both instances the primary and secondary sources provide a pick-and-mix of information that can be woven together to create something – or

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light: The new science of memory* (London: Profile Books, 2012) p. 281.

someone – new. Given the intricate links between memory and imagination,<sup>45</sup> this process of reconstruction and reincarnation inevitably draws on personal memory. The inciting impulses that inspired *Freethinkers* have already been touched on in the introduction to this critical commentary, but in this chapter I will examine the ways that memory and imagination have worked together in the development of the novel.

In Chapter One I identified the main primary source materials for Thomas's story, and how they have been used by historians and creative writers to reconstruct the events leading up to his execution. Now I will examine four of those sources more closely, in order to demonstrate the methodology I have used to develop my fictional versions of Thomas and Mungo. Mungo's two pamphlets and Thomas's gallows speech and final letter to his friends – known as his *cygnea cantio*, or swan song - are almost certainly the actual words of their authors, and as such are of particular value. Some of the other primary sources, such as Thomas's petitions, are written in the sort of language that suggests they were the work of a legal advisor - both Graham and Hunter<sup>46</sup> note that an edition of the *Protestant Mercury* newspaper published in January 1697 makes reference to his legal counsel, even if no defence lawyer is mentioned in

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<sup>45</sup> The linkage between memory and imagination in the creative writing process has been explored by many writers and theorists. Derek Neale's article 'Writing and Remembering: paradoxes of memory, imagination and fiction in stories about lives', *Literature Compass* 8/12 (2011) pp. 951-961) reviews writers' testimonies on the subject in the context of theories of consciousness and memory such as those put forward by Adam Phillips and Daniel Dennett. Charles Fernyhough's book *Pieces of Light: The new science of memory* (London: Profile Books, 2012) elaborates on the similarities between memory and imagination. He describes recent research showing that the same parts of the brain show activity when imagining a future event as are activated when remembering the past.

<sup>46</sup> Graham, p. 102, and Hunter, pp. 226-227.

the court records. Likewise Mungo's statement at the trial adheres to a particular formula, and is summarised and reported second-hand. So it was to the pamphlets, the gallows speech and the *cygnea cantio* that I turned to help me get a sense of the two people behind the events of 1696/97.

Before focusing on Mungo's first pamphlet, it is worth spending a moment or two considering the genre of the pamphlet in the late seventeenth century. There was 'an explosion of pamphleteering'<sup>47</sup> during the years of the Civil Wars, and pamphlet publication was a quick and relatively cheap way of criticising, proselytising and accusing. Anonymity was always an option for the author, which enabled the publication of wildly libellous and even treasonable tracts. Writers could see their manuscripts in print and available in bookshops and coffee shops within hours of them completing their final drafts, and many pamphlets were written in response to and refutation of other pamphlets. It is possible to see some similarities with our world of Web 2.0, where publication and interaction are open to a broad group of the population, and 'authoritative' opinions can be readily challenged and mocked. This sort of comparison can be helpful in trying to recreate the mood of the time when Mungo was publishing his pamphlets. The late seventeenth century was a time of change, rapid communications, and anxiety about what the future might hold; it was - in some ways - very like the early twenty-first century.

*A Satyr Against Atheistical Deism* is a sixteen-page pamphlet, with a page size smaller than that of a typical paperback. The British Library has a fairly

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<sup>47</sup> In *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) Joad Raymond argues that this 'forest fire' of publication originated in Edinburgh during the dispute between Charles I – an English king suspected of Catholic leanings, not least because of his Catholic wife – and Scottish Presbyterians.

well preserved copy. The paper is pale grey and very thin, reflecting that pamphlets were ephemeral artefacts, and not designed to last for over three hundred years. It is interesting to note that it was printed for the bookseller Robert Hutchison, in whose house Mungo had lodgings.<sup>48</sup> This raises questions about the genesis of the pamphlet. Was it the result of conversations between Mungo and his landlord? Undoubtedly Mungo's main motivation was to defend himself against the implications of Thomas's petition, but mercenary considerations might also have played their part in his decision to publish. He may have realised he had a story to sell, which would make his pamphlet a seventeenth-century equivalent of chequebook journalism. Mungo does not seem to have been wealthy - he is not recorded as having paid his university library fees at the time of Thomas's trial <sup>49</sup> - and while pamphlet production was cheap, it was not free. Where did he find the money to fund it? Was Hutchison willing to underwrite the expense, seeing the chance to cash in on a trial that was guaranteed to attract public attention? These are the kinds of questions that an artefact can raise, and they are useful questions for the historical novelist, because they compel us to consider the materiality of the world our characters inhabit, and that in turn leads to a more physical, definite type of writing.

Given Mungo's close connection with Hutchison it is likely they collaborated in the production of the pamphlet, and the decisions about its layout and appearance. On the front page of *A Satyr* we can see that the printer has used a hotchpotch of typefaces, with the words 'Atheistical Deism' picked out in a Blackletter font. This font dates back to the earliest days of moveable type, and is not dissimilar to the one favoured by Gutenberg in his first printed

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<sup>48</sup> Graham, p. 92.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Bibles. Perhaps the printer of Mungo Craig's pamphlet chose this font to highlight the anti-biblical awfulness of Aikenhead's offence. We are promised *An account of Mr. Aikinhead's* [sic] *Notions, Who is now in Prison for the same Damnable Apostacy*. Mungo makes sure to put some letters after his name. The abbreviations he uses are S.Ph. Sac.Th. – Student of Philosophy and Sacred Theology. University records show that he had been awarded his Master's degree the previous July, but that was most likely the general MA that all students had to complete before moving on to specialise in Divinity or Medicine. In using these letters he seems to be trying to convince his readers of his intellectual *bona fides*, while admitting his studies are incomplete.

Mungo then offers a snippet of his own verse, asking: 'Do you Admire, why with Satyrick Rhyme/I scourge the whistling Scoundrels of our Time?' Anyone who does not see the 'Justice of my Quarrel' must be 'a silly Fop, or Epicurean Sot.' He goes on to offer a quote in Latin from Juvenal's first *Satire*. It is as if he wants to make clear that he has had the benefit of a classical education. Translated, the quotation is revealing: 'Am I to be a listener all my days? Am I never to get a word in?...Though nature say me nay, indignation will prompt my verse, of whatever kind it be – such verse as I can write...' This is the point at which an idea of Mungo begins to emerge in my head. As Hilary Mantel says, there are 'moments when history dabs out a pointed fingertip and the nail sinks straight into your skin.'<sup>50</sup> I see a young man who feels overshadowed by a loquacious friend. Thomas is the one who gets all the attention, while Mungo sulks unappreciated in the background. There's no firm evidence of such a

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<sup>50</sup> Hilary Mantel, 'Unfreezing antique feeling', *Guardian*, 15 August 2009, Review section.

friendship dynamic between Thomas and Mungo, so this is an example of where my imagination starts to fill in the gaps between recorded facts.

Moving on to the next page of the pamphlet Mungo lists 'A Catalogue of the Works promised to the World,' by Thomas. They include 'a Sovereign [sic] Antidote, against all external and internal Causes of Death... which can cure a Man, although he were cloven in twain,' or as Thomas himself put it, 'Tho' he were speldered like a dry Haddock.' He also proposed a kind of space shuttle, 'whereby we may have easy Commerce with the other Vortices, and especially with the World in the Moon.'<sup>51</sup> Thomas speaks in the idiom of the quack or mountebank, full of extravagant claims and impossible promises.<sup>52</sup> Given his father's misadventures with the dangerous aphrodisiac fifteen years earlier, this is interesting. The personality of James Aikenhead develops in my imagination; perhaps he was a chancer, a charmer, a showman? If Mungo's report of Thomas's 'Catalogue of Works' was true, it would seem that Thomas had inherited some of his father's personality traits. Mungo appears to take this sort of frivolity very seriously: to him it's all evidence that Thomas is a 'frothy and crackbrained fellow'. He goes on to hint at the vile nature of Thomas's opinions, 'being a complete aggregate of all the blasphemies that ever were vented [...] by the Atheistical ministers of Satan in all ages, with an overplus of his own coining.'<sup>53</sup> He concludes his character sketch with the guarantee that the bookbinder can produce witnesses to attest to his claims against Thomas.

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<sup>51</sup> Craig, *A Satyr Against Atheistical Deism*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> When I presented a paper on Mungo's pamphlets at an Open University Postgraduate Arts conference the Early Modern Theatre Studies specialist, Dr Peg Katritsky, commented on the echoes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century quackery in the tenor and content of Thomas's claims.

<sup>53</sup> Craig, *A Satyr...*, p. 3.

The pamphlet continues with *A Satyr against Deism* – close to three hundred lines of rhyming couplets where he condemns the arrogance and impudence of freethinkers. This longwinded *Satyr* seems to be an opportunity for Mungo to show off his accomplishment – after all, every gentleman of taste should be able to turn his hand to versifying. However, there is more to the *Satyr* than an exercise in vanity. ‘Will Scotland nourish such apostacy?’ he asks, and urges the authorities to ‘atone/ with blood [...] and turn away that deluge of God’s ire/which threatens us worse than devouring fire’ (p. 10). It’s important to remember that Mungo is writing this when his friend is awaiting trial for a capital crime. It seems peculiarly vengeful of Mungo to encourage the judges to take the most severe approach possible. Even if there had been a falling out between Mungo and Thomas, his response is extreme. So another piece in the puzzle of Mungo’s character emerges: he is showing off his literary accomplishment while calling for his friend’s death.

The final part of the pamphlet is *The Genuine Character of a Deist*, a character sketch of a generic freethinker. The deist is portrayed as a ‘General Generalissimo of Sophisters’ (p. 12), full of quick wit without substance, ‘composed of malice, hatred and self-conceit’ (p. 15). Mungo regularly switches from English to Latin, and name checks all the chief darlings of the freethinkers: Aristotle; Epicurus; Hobbs; Descartes; Spinoza and Blount (p. 14). There might have been some danger in Mungo revealing his encyclopaedic knowledge of the ‘atheistical writers’, but he argues that he has studied them in order to counter their ideas – and, perhaps, to better catch out those who were inclined to follow them.

The three part composition of the *Satyr* may seem a little odd, but it could well have been dictated by the material constraints of the printing trade: pamphlets (and, indeed, books) were constructed from large printed sheets that were then folded several times. The number of folds created set numbers of pages, in multiples of four. An octavo item, such as Mungo's *Satyr*, was folded three times and had sixteen pages. The first two parts only take up eleven pages, so it is possible that the final section was little more than filler. In fact, only one page - the initial 'Catalogue of Works' - refers specifically to Thomas. If Mungo's intention had only been to undermine Thomas's reputation ahead of the trial he might have done that with a hand-bill or much shorter pamphlet, either of which would have been cheaper to produce. This suggests that Mungo saw the opportunity to use his connection with Thomas as a way to gain attention for himself and his writing skills.

Thomas's gallows speech and final letter to his friends strikes a very different tone to Mungo's pamphlet. His letter - written the evening before his execution – begins:

Being now wearing near the last moment of my time of living in this vain world, I have by the enclosed under my own hand, now when I am stepping into eternity, briefly as my time could only allow, given a true relation to the world in general [...] of the original rise, matter and



manner of my doubtings and inquisition, for which [...] I am now to die.<sup>54</sup>

He is particularly concerned to explain himself to ‘my dear and worthy friends (whom I from good ground may term parents)’. The comment in parenthesis is intriguing, as Thomas’s real parents had been dead for many years. The conclusion must be that there were parent-figures in Thomas’s life. In *Freethinkers* I allow Robert and Isobel Carruth to step into the role.

The tenor of the letter is one of sincerity and resignation, coupled with some concern for posterity - he hopes that he will be viewed with more charity after he is dead, and implores his friends to vindicate him from false charges of conversing with devils and practising magic.

It’s clear from the content of the letter that Thomas made several copies of his gallows speech, some of which he planned to hand to the clergymen and judges who would attend his execution. This shows an extraordinary degree of composure and forward thinking on the eve of his death.

Thomas’s gallows speech states that his hunger for truth had led him to reject the received precepts his parents and other authorities had imposed on him, and attempt – unsuccessfully - to build his faith on a foundation of reason. The spiritual conflict he describes is one that has featured in many conversion narratives from Augustine’s *Confessions* onward, and there are several examples of these testimonies in Scotland at this period. They were usually written by devout Christians – often ministers of religion – reflecting on a

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas’s final letter and gallows speech are included in the account of the trial in Howell’s *State Trials...*, pp. 930-934.

tormented period of spiritual doubt from their youth.<sup>55</sup> The happy ending was their eventual acceptance of religious orthodoxy, leading to redemption.

Thomas's narrative, of course, had a very different conclusion.

One of the most interesting aspects of the speech is the more nuanced impression it gives of Thomas's ideas. Up until this point the evidence has pointed in two directions. Was he a sneering hater of religion, as per Craig's evidence, or was he good Christian boy led into making such blasphemous statements under the influence of atheistical writers, and with Craig's encouragement? In all his petitions, both before and after the trial, he professed to a fully orthodox religious belief, and claimed it was 'his greatest happiness that he was born and educat[ed] in a place where the gospel was protested and so powerfully and plentifully preached'. The gallows speech offers a third possibility: that he had been a serious-minded seeker from around the age of ten, motivated by 'a pure love of truth'. He does not align himself with the generality of non-believers: indeed, he agrees with Craig's contention that most sceptics are immoral, and attracted to irreligious views by the liberty of lifestyle this affords them. He declares that his life has been free of vice – a view confirmed even by his detractors.

After considering several examples of conundrums he has not solved (Why would a merciful God withhold mercy? What is the difference between the doctrine of the Trinity and polytheism?) he concludes that the certainty he seeks

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<sup>55</sup> In *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead* Graham details two examples of conversion narratives. One is from the writings of Thomas Halyburton, once a fellow-student of Thomas's, who overcame his crisis of faith and later became a Presbyterian minister. The second is an account by Elizabeth West, an Edinburgh servant. Her doubts began when she read a book about Francis Spira, who Graham describes as a 'prototype figure for the sin of despair.' pp. 79 – 81. In *Freethinkers* this is the book that Katharine finds among Thomas's possessions after his death.

is beyond reach. The speech is no call to arms: quite the reverse. He cautions 'all men, especially ingenious young men, to beware and take notice of these things upon which I have split,' and claims to die 'in the full persuasion of the true Christian Protestant Apostolic faith...' He concludes by hoping 'that my blood may give a stop to that raging spirit of atheism which has taken such footing in Britain...' <sup>56</sup>

So just how much of a freethinker was Thomas? Was he, as Hunter suggested, a genuine representative of 'articulate irreligion', <sup>57</sup> or is Graham right to see him as the product of 'increased access to heterodox literature combined with the natural tendencies of young adults'? <sup>58</sup> In his gallows speech Thomas admits to significant and serious doubt and confesses to speaking disrespectfully of religion when under the influence of atheistical books. On the other hand, he repeatedly professes a conventional, if sometimes unenthusiastic, faith. Thomas received a great number of visitors during his imprisonment, and many of them were set on saving his soul. It is likely this final speech was influenced by the discussions and readings pressed on him by these well-meaning comforters. It is also possible that his confident disbelief wavered as death grew closer. However sincere or otherwise these late expressions of faith were, the Thomas writing in the gallows speech seems completely unlike the monster of arrogance portrayed by Mungo. It was reported that he died penitent,

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<sup>56</sup> Howell, *State Trials...*, p. 933.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Hunter, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, p. 221.

<sup>58</sup> Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead*, p. 81.

with a Bible in his hands, although not every eyewitness was convinced by his last-minute adoption of the trappings of belief.<sup>59</sup>

As stated earlier, the sting in Thomas's speech was the repetition of his accusation that Mungo was just as guilty as he was of atheism and doubt. It is worth pausing here to consider how Mungo might have viewed the situation at the time. Did he fear that he might be the next victim of the authorities' crackdown on freethinking? *We* know that Thomas would be the last person in Britain executed for blasphemy, but no one at the time had that certainty. Even if Mungo was reasonably confident that he would not find himself in the same situation as Thomas, he had the pressing matter of his own prospects. Like any modern libel victim he had to decide whether to keep quiet and hope it would all blow over, or to respond and defend himself.

Mungo opted for the latter course. It seems likely that Thomas's gallows accusation quickly became well known and widely believed, for within a week or so of the execution Mungo published his second pamphlet, *A Lye is No Scandal*. This time Mungo opted for two quotations from the Psalms on the title page: 'I will wash mine hands in Innocency so I will compass thine Altar O Lord,' and 'Let the lying Lips be put to Silence: Which speak grievous things proudly and Contemptuously against the Righteous.'<sup>60</sup> Perhaps Mungo would have been wise to stick with the biblical quotes, but it seems that once again he could not resist showing off his classical knowledge. The first quotation is from the Roman playwright Plautus' play *Amphitron*. This seems like an odd choice.

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<sup>59</sup> One eyewitness, Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, said Thomas died showing 'but little evidence of his sincere repentance' (Graham p. 2). However, at least two Presbyterian clergymen, who were in Edinburgh for the General Assembly, wrote that he had died penitent (Graham p. 122).

<sup>60</sup> Craig, *A Lye is no Scandal*, front cover.

It's a knockabout comedy, where the god Jupiter disguises himself as the soldier Amphytrion, then sleeps with Amphytrion's wife. The quote is from the unwittingly adulterous wife herself, when she says, 'A woman who has done nothing wrong ought to be bold and self-confident and forward in her own defence.' The second non-biblical quotation is from Horace, and has a darker, more vengeful tone: 'If anyone pursues me with a black<sup>61</sup> tooth, shall I, unavenged, weep like a child?'

The tone of the writing in the body of this pamphlet is very different from that in *A Satyr*. Instead of rhyming couplets and a satirical tone we find urgently argued prose. Mungo expresses his shock and surprise, both at Thomas's accusation against him, and the readiness with which the citizens of Edinburgh accepted it. He has just had the clearest possible demonstration of how the authorities will treat a blasphemer, and daren't risk being tarred with the same brush. Even assuming that Thomas's execution has provided sufficient release for the politico-religious tensions of Edinburgh's religious leaders – and it seems likely that the degree of public sympathy for Thomas might have made them unlikely to continue with their purge – Mungo clearly fears that his reputation is in tatters. He claims God has called him to the ministry, so it is absolutely necessary that he vindicate himself. His chosen career is on the line. He has to disprove Thomas's accusation, and show that he can make a skilful argument to boot. To some extent he succeeds, pointing out that Thomas's argument was circular: Thomas claimed he was innocent, but at the same time declared that Mungo was as involved in the 'hellish notions' as he was. Mungo elaborates on the evidence he gave at the trial, detailing example after example

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<sup>61</sup> 'Black' is sometimes translated as 'poisonous'.

of Thomas's blasphemous declarations. He deploys plentiful quotations from scripture to build up his credentials as a tyro clergyman. However, he is unable to answer the key question, one that he poses himself towards the end of the pamphlet: 'Is it not a strange thing, that a man should go to death with such a lie in his mouth?' Mungo claims this was not the only lie Aikenhead told in his last speech, but has decided against exposing any additional untruths, 'being I love to hector no man, especially the dead...' <sup>62</sup> – a claim that seems somewhat disingenuous after sixteen pages of condemnation. However, it seems that Mungo's efforts to redeem himself were in vain. His name does not appear in the register of Scottish clergy.

The fictions I write usually have their genesis in real events, but this is the first time I've written something with real historical characters. In some ways this is inhibiting: I feel an ethical requirement not to stray too far from the known facts. Tugging against this is my compulsion to fill the blanks in the history books with invention. Whatever the dilemmas, I have to bring Mungo and Thomas to life in a way that is credible. What strategies can I use to turn the scant evidence of their words into living, breathing characters?

Mungo and Thomas's words help me to form an idea of their personalities. They give me some insight into how their minds worked. However, words are nothing without living mouths to speak them. The word must be made flesh. This is a challenge for a writer such as myself, whose imagination tends to be verbal rather than visual. American novelist and short story writer Robert Olen Butler suggests writers cultivate a trance-like state in order to escape the

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<sup>62</sup> Craig, *A Lye is no Scandal*, p. 16.

limitations of 'literal memory'. He advises returning to a recent event that evoked emotion and journalling in a very particular way;

Record that event in the journal. But do this only - *only* - through the senses [...] never start explaining or analysing or interpreting an emotion [...] Such a journal entry will read like a passage in a novel, like the most intense moment-to-moment scene in a novel.<sup>63</sup>

I adopted this approach in developing Thomas and Mungo's characters, through generative writing of particular scenes where I try to inhabit how each character physically 'lived' and experienced the event - moment-by-moment, just as Butler suggests. There is also much to be learned from other historical novelists' approaches. Jude Morgan's *The Taste of Sorrow* opens with an astonishingly physical deathbed scene, as the Brontë sisters' mother endures the terminal agonies of cancer of the womb, 'her chin digging between her breasts, her clawing feet scaling the wall behind her bed.'<sup>64</sup> In *Wolf Hall* Hilary Mantel describes Anne Boleyn as having, 'black eyes, slightly protuberant, shiny like the beads of an abacus; they are shiny and always in motion, as she makes calculation of her own advantage,' combining precise physical depiction with an insight into Boleyn's character.<sup>65</sup> As I wrote each scene of *Freethinkers* I imagined my way into the sensory life of the characters and their world: the

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Olen Butler, *From Where You Dream* (New York: Grove Press, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Jude Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow* (London: Headline Review, 2010 [2009]) p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009) p. 166.

intense cold of an Edinburgh winter; the discomfort and restriction of women's clothing; the sensations and smells of a dissection.

While mulling over the story of Thomas and Mungo I remembered two young evangelical Christian men I came into contact with a few years ago. They were members of a local Baptist church that prided itself on its youth work. The church ran a weekend Youth Club staffed by cool, fashionably dressed young volunteers whose funky appearance masked a deeply conservative and rigid world-view that had not yet been softened by life experience. The two young men I particularly recalled were friends, but the balance of power between them did not appear to be equal. The dominant boy had striking curly red hair and was confident beyond his years. He let slip at one point that he reckoned he had been chosen by God for some great work. He did his best to hide his hunger for status, but it was clear he was desperate for the day when he would be a pastor, the person who everyone would have to listen to. His friend was more modest and self-effacing, with the squat, ungainly build of a schoolboy prop forward.

It would be over-dramatic to say that I had a moment of epiphany in remembering these two young men – they were not a perfect match for Thomas and Mungo - but I did realise that here was an incarnation of an interesting friendship dynamic. One, charismatic, determined and vocal, the other apparently content to follow in his friend's slipstream. This was the moment I broke free from the rather two-dimensional image of Mungo and Thomas that I had been constructing. I had seen Mungo's resentment of Thomas as something that would have been obvious to an observer, imagining him looking as shiftily as Judas in a painting of the Last Supper. What if he buried his feelings of being



overlooked, convincing others – and perhaps even himself – that he didn't mind? What if everyone thought he was just a nice, quiet guy?

The contrasting physicality of these two young men was also helpful in incarnating Thomas and Mungo. I appropriated the physical confidence of the red-haired young evangelical for Thomas (and put a tinge of copper in Thomas's hair), and made Mungo tall, burly and uncomfortable with his size and strength. They both attract attention because of their demeanour: Thomas due to his charisma and energy, Mungo due to his stature, and being unhappy in his own skin.

The techniques used to transform real historical people into players in a work of fiction are not so very different from those used in developing invented characters. The only difference is that with purely invented characters there are no specific primary sources to draw on, and no biographical facts to build from. However, the world of the past is already in place: history is like a matrix of time, location, event and individual, and the job of the writer is to insert his or her invented characters into the matrix. Invented characters do not develop outside the context of the historical world they are going to inhabit. For example, I developed the character of Dr Carruth by reading about medical practice in Edinburgh in the period, and also more broadly about scientific attitudes to women's health in the Early Modern era.<sup>66</sup> Dr Carruth specialises in

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<sup>66</sup> Helen Dingwall's *Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries – Medical Practice in Seventeenth-Century Edinburgh* details the growth and development of the various branches of the medical profession during the period, while Jane Sharp's 1671 manual of midwifery, *The Midwives Book*, (see footnote 69) demonstrates what was understood of female reproductive health in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Full

‘intimate mortifications’ of the female body: I have no direct evidence that doctors in the late seventeenth century had specialisms as we would now understand them, but it seemed credible that they *might* have, and that in a heavily populated city like Edinburgh some surgeons and physicians could gain distinction by having a specific skill. The term ‘intimate mortifications’ is my own invention, but it fits with the register of seventeenth century medical terminology. Dr Carruth’s professional expertise is ironically counterposed to his inadequacies as a husband.

Although the lives of women of this period are commonly supposed to be less well documented than those of men, there is in fact a wealth of resources available, and I turned to these as I developed the character of Isobel. One legacy of the Reformation’s emphasis on familiarity with the Bible was the encouragement of literacy for both sexes and across all social classes. Women were prolific letter-writers, and wives often took responsibility for keeping ‘household books’, which detailed expenditure on clothes, food, servants and other household expenses.<sup>67</sup> Referring to these resources helped me to understand the context of Isobel’s life. It was important that she not be merely a passive observer of the events surrounding Thomas’s downfall, nor a ‘victim’ of the disastrous first months of her marriage. Thus she is shown to have agency from early in *Freethinkers*, within the constraints she would have experienced

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details of these and other sources of information can be found in the bibliography.

<sup>67</sup> The household book of Grisel Baillie is a rich source of information on the minutiae of Scottish domestic life. Coincidentally, she was the daughter of Hume of Polwarth, who had the casting vote when Thomas’s appeal for a stay of execution was considered – and rejected – by the Privy Council. The household book is available online at: [http://www.archive.org/stream/householdbookofl00bailrich/householdbookofl00bailrich\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/householdbookofl00bailrich/householdbookofl00bailrich_djvu.txt)

as a respectable, married, middle-class Edinburgh woman. These constraints were actually a help rather than a hindrance: it is by confronting a character with obstacles – for example, practical obstacles to do with money, travel, and risk - that we uncover his or her true self. So it was that in Part III of *Freethinkers* I found myself having to think my way into Isobel's situation: how would she have gone about seeking out information regarding Mungo's role? In these ways research and imaginative acts feed into each other, enabling the invention of fictional historical characters.

In Chapter One of this commentary I considered two earlier fictionalisations of Thomas Aikenhead's story. One interesting aspect of both these pieces is that they are predominantly masculine. The only female characters in *Who Killed Aikenhead?* are his mother (who had in fact died in 1685, eleven years before his prosecution) and his fictional sweetheart Mary. In *The Blasphemer* there is only one female character – another invented love interest, Margaret. The real historical record is entirely male. By contrast, the earlier historical episode of James Aikenhead and the aphrodisiac has a strong female thread running through it. We know that Thomas was the only son in a family of daughters, and that not only was his mother a forceful and belligerent personality, but his sisters were literate and showed some financial acumen after his death;<sup>68</sup> James Aikenhead's aphrodisiac was designed to work on women; one woman was the victim of the misuse of the drug, and another was the perpetrator of the same. By inventing the character of Isobel, and other female characters such as the

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<sup>68</sup> Graham notes that Thomas's sisters Katharine and Anna negotiated the sale of his apartment in the Netherbow in 1698, and signed the necessary legal documents in a clear, legible hand. (*The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead*, p. 123.) In *Freethinkers* I have suggested, for simplicity's sake, that Katharine was the only surviving member of the family.

Carruth's enigmatic servant, Susan, I added to the distaff weighting of the retelling of this episode. This first section of the novel is prefaced by the visual image of a dissected woman, taken from a midwife's manual of the period,<sup>69</sup> and the opening scene is the autopsy of a pregnant woman. This strong female strand in the story was not a deliberate act of 'writing back': in fact, I only became conscious of it as I prepared this commentary. However, having seeded so many strong and intriguing female characters in Part I of the novel, it was inevitable that their influence would extend to the whole work, making my telling of Thomas's story much less male than the two earlier works by Bogle and Rosie. Isobel is in many ways a dominant figure throughout the novel, and in Part III we finally get access to her interior life, and understand that she represents the moral heart of *Freethinkers*.

It is worth touching at this point on the purpose of invented characters in fiction based on real historical events and people. Both fictional works referred to in Chapter One introduced fictional love interests for Thomas. *Who Murdered Aikenhead?* also devised a lawyer to act as Thomas's informal advisor. All of these invented characters are introduced to carry some of the necessary exposition, and to act as a sounding board for Thomas. These are both perfectly acceptable reasons to bring the characters in, even though they do not fulfil their tasks with much subtlety in either work – neither Bogle nor Rosie employ sufficient sleight of hand to distract the reader from their prosaic purpose. However, invented characters also offer a solution to the ethical dilemma of presuming to represent the inner life of real people who can no

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<sup>69</sup> Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book or the Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered* (London: printed for Simon Miller, 1671); Elaine Hobby, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

longer answer back. An invented character can narrate the events of the real person's life, and the act of inventing a 'possible version' of events creates a 'possible truth'.<sup>70</sup>

In summary, transforming an historical character into someone real who can occupy the living space of the novel requires a complex fusion of research, imagination and memory. These people and their stories need invented characters to support the unfolding narrative, and the process for developing the invented and real characters is broadly similar. In both cases it begins with the study of primary sources for first-hand and eyewitness testimony, and secondary sources for a sense of historical context. However, research by itself is not enough. The writer must deliberately step away from the computer and into his or her own memory and imagination. As the novelist Helen Dunmore says, 'writers do the research in order to be at home with the material: in order to half-forget it, in the way that one half-forgets one's own past.' The author needs to move beyond the known facts and into the 'intimacy and resonance of being alive at that time, not knowing what is to come...'<sup>71</sup> In my own writing process I have needed to investigate my own motivations, and leave myself open to serendipitous - dare I say, continuous - revelation. These three elements – research, memory and imagination – need to be allowed to catalyse with each other in an unforced way. Sometimes there has been a crackle of creative electricity as a connection flashes across the gap between the primary

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<sup>70</sup> The idea of a 'possible truth' was articulated by Derek Neale in his response to an earlier draft of this critical commentary.

<sup>71</sup> Helen Dunmore, 'On Writing *The Siege*', *Guardian*, 19 February 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/19/helen-dunmore-the-siege-book-club>

historical sources and some aspect of my own experience. That's when I know I'm really talking to the dead, and better still, they are talking back.

## Chapter Four

### The Plot Thickens: from historical fact to historical fiction

But the novel's task, unlike that of history, is to stretch our intellectual, spiritual, and imaginative horizons to breaking point.

- Christine Brooke-Rose, *Palimpsest History*<sup>72</sup>

The previous chapter examined the ways in which the creative fusion of research, memory and imagination enable characters - both 'real' and fictional - to be incarnated in an historical novel. Structure and plot are also generated by this fusion, and it is to this process we now turn. Of course, all the strands of fiction - characterisation, voice, point of view, tense, plot, structure - are meshed together, and a decision on one area will impact on the others. The creative process is a holistic one, and decisions on these different strands tend to emerge almost subconsciously from the action of writing and rewriting. This chapter will unravel and anatomise the ways this process played out in the writing of *Freethinkers*. The work of Hayden White is of particular interest in this context. His ideas have done much to 'dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses',<sup>73</sup> and he argues compellingly that as narrative history is in many senses a work of fiction, so overtly fictional interpretations of the past are worthy of serious study. The following long quotation from *The*

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<sup>72</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Palimpsest History', in *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, Umberto Eco, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 137.

<sup>73</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. x.

*Content of the Form* raises a number of key points that have influenced my thinking in developing the structure of *Freethinkers*:

It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult [...] What is involved, then, in that finding of the "true story", that discovery of the "real story" within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of "historical records"? What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity [...]

If we view narration and narrativity as the instruments with which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it. (p. 4)

In a later essay White examines how postmodernist strategies can be used to deal with 'impossible narratives' - those which do not lend themselves to historical narrativisation.<sup>74</sup> The historical events behind *Freethinkers* do not naturally fall into a narrative arc – they are fragmentary, episodic and inconclusive. White's essay helped me to understand some of my own thinking

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<sup>74</sup> Hayden White, 'Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties', *The Fiction of the Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory 1957 - 2007* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).



as I struggled to find a suitable form for these episodes, and also alerted me to why I find the fragmentary approach particularly fitting. Growing up in Northern Ireland I have seen how there are many versions and refractions of 'facts', so perhaps I regard the traditional narrative approach to history as invalid or intrinsically untruthful. Humans have a tendency towards narrativisation: 'story telling' can very quickly become 'story shaping'. The desire for coherence frequently trumps the wish to be accurate.<sup>75</sup> In a Northern Irish context those stories can have dangerous - even deadly - consequences. Resisting the impulse to write narrative history may be a more truthful and responsible option.

So is the act of imposing a narrative to be admired, because it requires skill and craft, or regarded as a mark of cowardice, an inability to face up to the disjointed, non-narrative nature of reality? In the same way, should atheism be regarded as an act of bravery, a willingness to face up to the fact that there is no higher meaning to existence? What emerged for me from this line of thought was that these tensions - between coherence and fragmentation; between the meta-narrative of religious faith and atheism's rejection of the same - were absolutely core to *Freethinkers*. The content and the form were - as Hayden White advocates - inextricably linked.

In Chapter One of this critical commentary I touched on the historical background to the story of Thomas Aikenhead. A simple chronology of events is as follows:

Early 1676	Thomas Aikenhead is born
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<sup>75</sup> Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light*, p. 124 & p. 131.

1682	James Aikenhead found guilty of supplying dangerous aphrodisiacs
1683	James Aikenhead dies
1685	Helen Ramsey (Thomas's mother) dies
October 1696	John Fraser imprisoned for blasphemy
November 1696	Thomas arrested and charged with blasphemy
Nov/Dec 1696	Mungo Craig's <i>A Satyr Against Atheistical Deism</i> published
24 December 1696	Thomas's trial: he is found guilty and sentenced to death
8 January 1697	Thomas is executed at the Gallowlee, on the road to Leith. His final letter and gallows speech are circulated in Edinburgh
15 January 1697	Mungo Craig's second pamphlet, <i>A Lye is no Scandal</i> , published

When I took my first steps into the story that became *Freethinkers* I had so many ideas about how to approach it that it was hard to know where to begin. As mentioned in Chapter One, I began by writing what was meant to be an exploratory short story about the aphrodisiac incident. As it became clear that this thread of the story was taking on a life of its own, I began to think about how that might influence the overall shape of the novel. I liked the idea of a novel made up of separate, self-contained novellas - that notion appeals to my taste for the fragmentary - and I could see a way of mapping the atmosphere of the Troubles and Post-conflict Northern Ireland onto the events of 1682 and 1696/7. Both parts were given titles of their own. The first part became *The*

*Fabric of the Human Body* - a literal translation of the title of Italian doctor Andreas Vesalius's book of anatomical engravings, *De humani corporis fabrica*. This reflects the key motif of the vulnerable body in this section of the novel. The second part became *Anatomy of an Accusation*. This is a quotation from Mungo's second pamphlet and in addition continues the 'body' thread. It also hints at the 'detective story' form that I was aiming for in this part of the novel, as Isobel tries to understand Thomas's death. As a reflection of the changing shape of the novel I changed the title from *Death of a Freethinker* to *Freethinkers*, because all the main voices were, in their different ways, aspiring towards freedom.

One of the most difficult decisions to make was whose voices should tell the story. There were so many possible candidates, and the challenge was to pick the ones who would most engage the reader and who could carry enough of the story to make it comprehensible. As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this commentary, I began by telling the aphrodisiac story in the third person with Dr Carruth as the viewpoint character. The narrative then jumped forward fifteen years to the aftermath of Thomas's execution, told in the first person voice of Isobel. I did not have any particular strategy in opting for these points of view - they were simply how the two stories emerged. As with most first attempts at writing, they were good in parts: Isobel's section - while shaky on some elements of the plot - made a good start on her voice. Dr Carruth's section was more problematic. I had introduced a number of complicating factors into the plot, which needed much more room to breathe if they were to survive at all. However, the key issue was that of narrative voice. An early reader summed this up as follows: 'The viewpoint also leads to a lot of what I call 'protective'

writing. It's always poised, quite becalmed, and elegant. Irving (Carruth) always has time to remember, anticipate, or calculate. He never stops thinking.'<sup>76</sup>

Looking back at the extracts from Jude Morgan and Hilary Mantel discussed in Chapter Three, they are both writing in the present tense, a choice which gives the narrative both immediacy and claustrophobia. There is no protective distance from the events unfolding, no implication of post hoc reflection to mitigate each incident and experience. Mantel's approach highlights that in addition to making the characterisation physically 'real' a writer must also bring the psychology of his or her characters alive. To bring Dr Carruth more fully to life I rewrote the first section of *Freethinkers* in first person present tense. As Hilary Mantel says: 'The present tense forbids hindsight and propels us forward through this world, making it new, just as it was, in every unfolding moment, for the players.'<sup>77</sup>

The first person present tense narrator is maintained in the voice of Thomas as a child in the other strand of *The Fabric of the Human Body*. Present tense is particularly appropriate for a young child's voice, as small children tend to live in the moment. Thomas's actual date of birth is unknown. It is often reported that he was eighteen at the time of his death, but he was baptised on 28th March 1676, so he was more likely to have been nearly twenty-one. Given the fact that he was orphaned in childhood he may well have been a bit vague about his birth year, and he might also have seen some strategic advantage in claiming to be

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<sup>76</sup> Linda Anderson, in response to an early draft of the first section of the novel.

<sup>77</sup> Hilary Mantel, interviewed on <http://www.harpercollins.com.au/author/authorExtra.aspx?isbn13=9780007230204&displayType=readingGuide>

younger than he was when he came to trial. If he was born in early 1676 that would make him around six years old at the time of the aphrodisiac incident - just about old enough to narrate the events from a child's eye view. By making him precociously clever (as he probably was) I felt I could carry this off. Thomas's exuberant, perceptive and slightly anarchic voice is intended to act as a foil to Dr Carruth's repressed, reflective personality.

Having woven the voices of Dr Carruth and young Thomas together in the first part of the novel, it seemed that in the interests of aesthetic harmony a similar approach would be needed in *Anatomy of an Accusation*. The two parts of the novel would mirror each other's form. Mungo Craig was the most fitting choice to share the narrative with Isobel, partly because, as with Dr Carruth and young Thomas, there is a high degree of contrast in their voices. Most crucially we see another side of the story through Mungo, and another view of Thomas.

So it was that the first full draft of the novel told the two stories - the aphrodisiac incident and Thomas's downfall - with each section narrated by two voices spliced together. This worked fairly well in *The Fabric of the Human Body*, with Dr Carruth and Thomas passing the baton of the narrative between them as events unfolded. However, it proved less satisfactory in the first draft of *Anatomy of an Accusation*. Both parts use some of the tropes of detective fiction: in *Fabric* Dr Carruth is the 'detective' racing against time to save Jonet Stewart, and then pursuing the perpetrators of the crime; *Anatomy*, on the other hand, opens with the dead body - Thomas on the gallows - and follows Isobel as she tries to uncover who was really responsible. The structure of the detective story - where the narrative moves forward, but uncovers the

narratives of the past as it goes - proved difficult to splice with Mungo's story, which I was telling in a non-chronological mixture of present and flashback in order to reflect Mungo's disordered state of mind. This was not a satisfactory approach - early readers found it hard to follow. My solution was to begin Mungo's story in the 'present' of the day of Thomas's execution, and allowing it to unfold until his departure from Scotland. The background to Thomas's downfall is conveyed through Mungo's 'conversion narrative', which he is writing partly as a personal testimony or justification, and partly as a release for his fear and guilt. This seemed like a credible action for Mungo to take: it is a matter of historical record that he wrote for publication when circumstances required it, and that he used these publications to advertise his talents and aspirations to the ministry.

The events leading up to Thomas's arrest were touched on in Mungo's narrative, but the most important lacuna in this version of the novel was Thomas's trial and execution. While the trial is well documented, the transcripts themselves are simply a series of statements from the witnesses, topped and tailed with the indictment and the verdict. The statements are often repetitive and there is none of the cut and thrust one might expect from a courtroom drama. It was important to include the trial in the novel as a bridge between the two sections, but I was anxious to find a fresh way to use the source material.

To find a way through this I began to look at examples of verbatim theatre, where real individual testimonies are assembled into a dramatic production. One particularly useful work was *The Colour of Justice*, a drama based on the transcripts of the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. The

author, Richard Norton-Taylor, distilled nearly eleven thousand pages of transcripts into a play running to little over one hundred pages. In making his choices of which ‘telling exchanges’ to include he focused on those which ‘reflect the interlocking threads which ran throughout the inquiry’.<sup>78</sup>

Using this approach I identified where each of the witness statements in Thomas’s trial introduced some new piece of evidence, focusing on specific accusations that added weight to the case against him. The objective was to create a sense of rising tension pointing towards Mungo’s climactic and damning statement, where he claims Thomas did not just doubt God, but mocked Him too. I excised repetition and unhelpful seventeenth century verbiage to reduce each statement to a manageable length, and interwove the statements with Thomas’s interior response. The whole episode was framed with two short sections of monologue from Thomas, *Genesis* and *Revelation*, which played on his search for truth and rejection of religious orthodoxy.

The plot and structure of an historical novel is assumed to be imposed by real events, but the experience of writing *Freethinkers* seems to confirm Hayden White’s contention that it is the narrative that imposes a shape on historical fact. Indeed, the compulsion to narrativise is so strong that it is almost irresistible. Whether this is due to a hard-wired human instinct for storytelling or a manifestation of cultural conditioning is open for debate, but it is evident that historical ‘facts’ are not the drivers of plot and structure. The process of writing a novel can feel organic and serendipitous, but it is apparent in retrospect that the urge to narrativise underpins every apparently random moment of

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Colour of Justice* (London: Oberon Books, 2004 [1999]), p. 8.

inspiration. Research, imagination and memory are pressed into the service of the narrative. Of course, in the context of a fact-based historical novel, this can lead to a tension between matters of historical record and the imperative of narrative. Perhaps the only satisfactory way of managing this tension is to follow Eco's advice and knowingly give ourselves up to it.



## Conclusion

All enquiry and all learning is but recollection.

- Sophocles (attrib by Plato) *The Meno*<sup>79</sup>

This critical commentary set out to investigate the ways in which research, imagination and memory fuse creatively in the writing of an historical novel. There is a view that any work of art – be it novel, sculpture or symphony – is something ‘found’, or merely excavated by the artist.<sup>80</sup> I would argue that the creative fusion analysed in this commentary does not sit comfortably with this view. Research can tangentially summon up a memory, but that memory itself is not ‘found’ – it is constructed anew by the imagination each time it emerges. Similarly our experiences and memories may draw us subconsciously to particular types of historical event. My first encounter with Thomas Aikenhead’s story seemed accidental - the result of picking up a book and stumbling on a story that chimed with my preoccupations and memories. However, picking up one book rather than another is a matter of choice, not chance. One title attracts us where another does not. Research is provoked and directed by our own inciting impulse, which brings me to consider why the story of Thomas and Mungo had appealed to me in the first place.

Coming from a faith-infested place like Northern Ireland, there’s little surprise that religion holds a strong fascination. Protestantism in a Northern

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<sup>79</sup> Plato, ‘Meno’, translated by Benjamin Jowett in *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006 [1986]), p. 231.

<sup>80</sup> The notion of artwork as ‘found’ has been articulated by (or attributed to) thinkers and writers as diverse as Plato, Michelangelo and Stephen King.

Irish context is fragmented, with many different denominations and splinter sects. When Protestants disagree with the theological approach of their minister they either move to another church or denomination, or set up a new church. A non-conformist thread runs through Northern Irish Protestantism, manifesting itself in a privileging of personal conscience above the authority of clergy. The oppressive power of the Presbyterian Kirk in Thomas Aikenhead's Scotland was not replicated in Ulster: the combination of a powerful established Anglican church and penal laws kept Presbyterians (often styled 'Dissenters' in Ireland) in check, and rendered them anti-establishment.<sup>81</sup> This disputatious aspect of Protestantism is the one I have carried with me, even while leaving the accompanying religious beliefs behind. I have an innate admiration for idealists who stand up to the orthodoxy, and as a sceptic I have a deep mistrust of lawmakers who want to impose their religious certainties on society as a whole. It is obvious why I find Thomas's story compelling. However, it would be all too easy to make Mungo - or indeed the devout members of the authorities who persecuted Thomas - pantomime villains. In early drafts of *Freethinkers* I found that I was slipping into the cliché of Mungo as religious maniac, and had to correct myself, as it seemed like a lazy and untruthful approach. Having spent my whole life in close contact with religious believers – and having been one

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<sup>81</sup> According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, 'In 1695 the Irish Parliament, dominated by the Ascendancy, passed the first of the penal laws - a series of harsh discriminatory measures against Catholics and Presbyterians in Ireland. These laws disenfranchised Catholics, placed restrictions on their ownership of property, hindered them from entering the professions, and obstructed their education.'  
<http://www.britannica.com/libezproxy.open.ac.uk/EBchecked/topic/172746/Dublin/59519/Ascendancy-in-the-18th-century?anchor=ref295750>

myself – I know that the stereotypes do not properly represent the nuances and complexities of people of faith.<sup>82</sup>

Focusing on the relationship between Mungo and Thomas, when I think back to some unequal friendships from my young adulthood I feel a certain kinship with Mungo and his longing to have his moment in the spotlight. Thomas emerged from this as a blazing star, with all the confidence that arises from being the clever, independent child of a family that had once been respectable and prosperous. The Aikenheads might have gone down in the world, but they were well bred - an impoverished gentleman is still a gentleman - and I gifted Thomas with the swagger that comes with that kind of inheritance.<sup>83</sup> Having fallen upon hard times due to his parents' misfortunes he may also - dangerously - have thought he had nothing to lose. We have probably all, at some point in our lives, been the 'boring friend' of someone dazzling, and these relationships are often an uncomfortable blend of adoration and envy. It is hard to imagine what it must be like to be the charismatic one in such a friendship - and perhaps this is one of the reasons it has been difficult for me to find my way

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<sup>82</sup> I found John Buchan's novel *Witch Wood* useful in devising a more nuanced approach. *Witch Wood* portrays David Sempill, a devout young Presbyterian minister in mid-17th Century Scotland, who is caught between a battle against entrenched occult practices in his parish and the political and religious turmoil of the time. Although some of the religious believers portrayed display hypocrisy and rigidity, many of the novel's characters are diligently trying to live Christian lives. Sempill is particularly sympathetic, and Buchan skilfully portrays a man of genuine faith without disengaging even a sceptical 21st century reader.

<sup>83</sup> Graham's assessment of the Aikenhead family's 'relatively prosperous' position at the time of Thomas's birth derives from the respectable status of the nine witnesses to his baptism, who were likely members of the extended family (pp. 84-5). In 1692 Sir Patrick Aikenhead, a relative of Thomas's, signed over to him ownership of an apartment in the Netherbow (p.86), so in spite of his orphaned status he was far from destitute. Mungo, on the other hand, was the son of a cordiner and had only three lower status witnesses at his baptism (p. 92).

into Thomas's head - but it is very easy to 'live' the experience of being Mungo.

At the very end of *Freethinkers* Isobel and Robert sit together in the darkness considering their own roles in Thomas's downfall. They have finally admitted to each other their loss of religious faith, and take some comfort in knowing that on this point at least they are soul mates. Isobel thinks: 'Some might look up at the night sky and discern the hand of God in the pattern of the stars. Not Robert and I. If we see patterns they are the product of our own longings.'

Like Isobel, the novelist must accept responsibility for constructing a version of reality. The desire for story is satisfied and the chaos of history transformed into narrative. The Thomas Aikenhead of *Freethinkers* is not the young man who lived and died in Edinburgh over three hundred years ago: my Thomas – along with his friends and enemies – is an invention, a product of the creative fusion of history and imagination.

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